



# WHOLE CHURCH INITIATIVE

## **Gather & Pray**

Title: Reading Texts for Spiritual Formation

Developed by the “Pilot Group” of SonRise Church, Pueblo West, Colorado.  
Adapted for Whole Church Initiative with permission and gratitude.

### **Introduction**

The written word can play a significant role in spiritual growth as one learns from the collected wisdom of the Body of Christ by way of text. Reading for spiritual formation differs from reading strictly for information or entertainment. Therefore we have collected these recommendations for individuals and groups to best select, process, and apply what is learned by reading the written word.

## Text Selection

With so many books, ebooks, periodicals, websites, blogs, articles, and other texts on the market today, and the limited time and attention of most individuals, materials should be selected carefully and with purpose. When selecting a text for a group setting, consider the following aspects:

- **Is the text recommended by others serving in a similar ministry stage and/or context?** Marketing is a strong force in our culture, even within the Christian book world. Take a friend or colleague's recommendation over promises from an advertisement. Ask whether what they recommend would be a good fit for your own or your group's needs.
- **Is the reading level or theological difficulty aligned with the abilities of the reader(s)?** Does the author use everyday language or do they use theological terms like "infralapsarianism" and assume everyone knows what that means? It's good to try texts that stretch a group, but it should not be so difficult that the readers lose interest or hope in understanding.
- **Does the text have a significant potential to trigger conflict or divide a group?** Some authors may insult a particular type of people, political group, or perspective in order to justify their own beliefs. Seek to select texts that help readers discern God's intentions, rather than becoming absorbed in the author's agenda.
- **What is the commitment level of the group?** Are a significant majority of the group members attending most meetings? If attendance is sporadic, select a book that provides stand-alone topics for processing, providing the ability to step away and return to conversations without frustration or guilt.
- **What is the time frame for the group to complete a text?** How often does the group meet? Determine how long a book will take to complete based on the group's schedule – this might determine what types of books are selected. Most groups will not want to work through a text longer than a few months. More often than not, it is better to increase the amount read between discussions rather than working with a book longer than a few months.
- **What is the stage of the group's development?** If a group has just formed, select a text that allows people to get to know one another and build relationships. Some books require high trust to be read and processed meaningfully as a group – save these types of texts for when the group has reached a later stage.
- **What does the group desire in the way of spiritual formation?** Focus the selection process based on what the group desires – this increases the chances that all will stay engaged in the process.



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- **What other texts are recommended by favorite authors?** Texts often will include a recommended reading list which may guide the group toward their next selection.

## Interacting with the Text

When reading for the purposes of spiritual formation, we recommend purchasing a hard copy of the text and making it your own. On the inside cover or title page of the book, write your name, the date, and the occasion for reading. Select a pen and highlighting color that will be used for the entire book. This way, if you ever return to the book at a later season of life, a different pen and highlighter color can allow you to see how God speaks differently with each reading. Those who prefer to read e-books may adapt this method to their chosen technology.

As you read, interact with the author by highlighting or underlining main points and new information. Asking questions of the author, God, or for self-reflection right in the text turns the book into a kind of spiritual journal. If you plan to facilitate a group discussion, add questions for the group. Trust that the questions rising up during reading may be more aligned with what God is doing in your life or in the group than are the questions provided at the end of the chapter. Avoid reading the questions provided at the end of the chapter or book before engaging in the reading directly, even if this is backwards to how you were taught in school!

The following are some examples of question forms readers may use as they interact with a text:

- What is the meaning of ...
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ connect with or differ from my experience?
- What emotions or reactions does \_\_\_\_\_ evoke in me?
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ relate to \_\_\_\_\_?
- What is the significance of ...
- Why does the \_\_\_\_\_ do/say \_\_\_\_\_?
- How do the reasons support ...
- What are the implications of ...
- What are the differences between ... (Why do these differences exist)?
- If I integrated \_\_\_\_\_ into my life, how would I be different?

Spiritual reading is a prayerful act – the reader seeks to recognize that God is present throughout. Take time to read slowly and reflectively, stopping to pray and think when a passage moves you. Spiritual formation is not about getting the “right answers” to achieve a grade. Good authors welcome and find joy in their readers asking their own questions, experimenting and wrestling with the material, and adapting suggestions to best fit a context. Treating your reading as a spiritual formation activity will enable you to make non-routine observations, such as identifying passages difficult to understand, crucial features of the text, and passages that express profound or theologically significant ideas.



## Preparing Heart and Mind for Spiritual Reading

The time of day can affect the process of reading for spiritual formation. Select the time of day when your body would welcome rest, but the mind and spirit are still alert. For many individuals, this is during the early morning, in the early afternoon, or early evening. Spiritual reading can also be a wonderful Sabbath activity. Like devotional or prayer time, reading may need to be a regularly scheduled part of your daily or weekly rhythm so that it is not squeezed out by other activities.

Just as in a healthy prayer life, personal events or circumstances will surface feelings during reading for spiritual formation. At times, these feelings will affect the reading process in ways that are both helpful and unhelpful. Before and throughout the reading time, be aware of the potential for transference – when feelings of the reader overtake what the author is attempting to communicate. If you notice yourself losing focus on the text and primarily writing notes pertaining to your feelings or circumstances, take it as a sign to step away from reading so that you can pray and journal.

Leaders of group discussions also need to be aware of this potential for transference among their group members. If a group member seeks to connect every question or point of the author or fellow group member to their current situation and dominates the discussion, the discussion leader may wish to meet with that person (privately) to talk about the situation. This acknowledges the feelings of the person, while being courteous to the other group members who came prepared for a discussion around the text, rather than a personal counseling session.

## Processing a Text

Processing a text after reading can happen in a variety of ways. One traditional method is writing a book review of sorts, summarizing the book and critiquing the author's viewpoints. This is a wonderful way to create a personal library catalogue – one that can be returned to when selecting books for groups or recommending books to others.

Another method involves reading sections of the text (typically, chapters) and answering discussion questions. Many texts today include questions or study guides as a resource. Group leaders can read the questions ahead of the discussion, perhaps selecting the two or three that they believe are the best for their group. The processing of a text does not involve an exam – therefore, it is not necessary to prepare an answer for every question! Quality is indeed better than quantity when it comes to spiritual reading and discussion.

If processing the book in sections as a group, try to avoid using the same routine each time. Varying the process helps engage the different gifts of the group, and provides the opportunity



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to reflect the spirit of the section read. For example, if a section of a text talks about serving the poor, it might be most effective for the group to process the section by actually serving the poor alongside one another followed by debriefing and connecting the experience to that of the author. If a text teaches about prayer, the group can try the methods provided as a way to process the book. A well-planned activity will get a group discussing a book in very deep ways, often without the leader asking one single question out loud! An activity saturated in meaning will have the group members continuing to think and talk long after the book has been returned to the shelf.

Processing books in creative ways can and should stretch people out of their comfort zones. It can take a while for people to recognize the value of this, and to welcome it as a regular part of the journey in faith. Most likely the group will be willing to go along if the leader is up front about the activity involving discomfort – sometimes raising the anticipation is a good thing! The group can rejoice when a leader is willing to risk processing a book in a new and different way, even if all doesn't go perfectly.

At times there will be someone who opts out of the process, openly or subtly. If this happens, the group leader (perhaps privately) can lean in, asking the person to share their thoughts and reactions at being invited to participate. Sometimes “the problem” is not the real problem. As the leader, focus on asking the right questions and listening - this can help the person make conclusions for themselves. What does the person say they desire in the way of spiritual growth? Are their actions aligning with this? Are their motives aligned with God's purposes and patterns? Whatever the person's answers to questions along these lines, affirm the person for sharing, and ask what could be done next time to help them participate.

The technology available today can greatly support the processing of books. Many avid readers will blog about the texts they have read, creating a personal online catalogue of reviews. Wordpress.com is an excellent, free resource that allows groups to password-protect their online conversations in a website or blog, or you may wish to set up a closed (private) Facebook group.

When processing a book online, establish a basic covenant. For example, the group may need to be reminded to remain confidential about what is shared and to be cautious about using sarcasm or other variations in tone that are difficult to pick up on in the cyber world. Online processing can be an excellent option for those groups who struggle with regular face-to-face meeting attendance. Be cautious, though, about believing online discussions are easier or more efficient. Online groups unwilling to commit enough time and attention to the process may not engage as deeply in critical thinking. Online processing can also serve as an excellent supplement for face-to-face meetings, as some group members share best through writing, rather than speaking.