

Books Borrow, Bridge, and Build Up

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Why a Church Book Club is a Good Idea

For the past two years I've asked myself if a book club at church is a worthwhile venture. I went from asking friends and then asking the leadership to actually starting one. Once a month we meet to discuss a variety of books, fiction, non-fiction, Christian authors, non-Christian authors, and anything else that strikes our fancy. It has been an enlightening journey. I have not only seen the value of the book club but have been encouraged time and time again in the discussions and in the relationships that have grown. My questions have been answered with a resounding "Yes!" through the joy of deep conversations with friends and the deepening of relationships among the women in our church. I believe book club fosters all this because of what books do. Books borrow stories, bridge differences, and build empathy. In short, they bring us together and I want to share a bit more of how that has happened.

Biographies and memoirs are my favorite books. *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom and *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Eric Metaxas are my all time favorites. The courage it took for Ten Boom and Bonhoeffer to stand up to the Nazi regime takes me outside of my suburban comforts and forces me to face my own resolve in fighting the evils in my time. My church is not in a place where we face death or even imprisonment for our beliefs. Still, we are not guaranteed this will always be the case. The stories books give us challenge us, make us look at the injustices in our community, and push us to ask ourselves, "What would, what could, what should we do?" The discussion that comes from books like these gives churches the opportunity to safely wrestle with our fears and be emboldened by each other to do the right thing when the time comes.

Next, in reading *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman, we entered into the mindset of a man determined to end his life. We knew this man and his friends were fiction, but the beauty of well-written fiction is that the characters become real. And because they became real to us, we laughed with them and cried with them. A bridge was built between the reader and those in the book. A bridge that we can and should be reminded of as we go out into our neighborhoods and families. In these local communities we find real people who are facing some of the same things those characters faced. Empathy for our neighbors might have been planted in our hearts through reading a book, but those seeds can bear eternal fruit as we enter the fields white for harvest (see John 4:35)

We can also build empathy for the struggles of those around us by reading stories that reflect our own story. I have seen women in our group share hard things they have faced in their own lives because they have heard the sympathy and understanding of those in the room while discussing a book together. It becomes easier to open up about abortion, same-sex attraction, divorce, and abusive relationships when you have heard sisters in Christ discuss

these same topics in a kind manner. In this way, a book club can become a place where sympathetic listeners become ministers of gospel grace. Because the church should be the first place of safety for those who hurt, we should look for ways to cultivate such places. And I have found in our book club a fitting place to start that discussion within the security of the church.

Books also bring. They bring us into past and present ideas. When you read a classic like *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, you see that how an older story has enduring value. Written by one of the greatest authors of all time, Lewis speaks to our present day struggles and reminds us that there is no sin or temptation that is not common to mankind. I look forward to one day reading *1984* with my group and seeing how the fears presented by George Orwell may or may not be realities in our day and what we can and should do about them.

Ultimately, my favorite thing about books is that books bring us together. I have been surprised every time a woman stops me at church to talk about some of her thoughts. Our conversation jumps from "Hi!" to "Hey, guess what happened in my life, that reminded me of the book we are reading." Or they share with me how God has used the book to give them a new understanding about their current circumstances. Recently, I have had very few shallow conversations on Sunday mornings, and I love it!

In the end, books are really just a starting point of what we are called to do as a church. Proverbs invites us to sharpen one another and Hebrews tells us to exhort one another until the Day arrives. Our book club lets us do that. Just the same, the command to make disciples and grant mercy to those who suffer is also facilitated by our book club. And finally, a conversation about books—some Christian, some not so much—provides a starting place for conversations with people on the fringe (or outside) our church and outside of Christ.

I pray our book club continues and grows in all these areas as we get the privilege to know and appreciate what is true, good, and beautiful. And because there are thousands of wonderful books waiting to be read and shared, I trust we will have plenty to talk about. And as always, there's a place for you in our discussion, if you'd like to join us.