

Do I Have to Keep a Journal?

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Occasionally I am asked, “Does a Christian have to keep a journal in order to grow more like Jesus Christ?” Of course not. There is no command in Scripture—explicit or implied—requiring the followers of Jesus to keep a journal. And while I’ve written and spoken of the benefits of keeping a spiritual journal, I’ve never written or said that the Bible anywhere obligates Christians to keep a journal. In fact, I have never read or heard anyone making such a claim. Moreover, there is absolutely no evidence—biblical or otherwise—that Jesus kept anything like a spiritual journal. While we credit the Lord Jesus Christ (since He is a member of the Triune Godhead) with the ultimate inspiration of all the written Word of God, the only account of Jesus physically writing anything during the days of His humanity is when He stooped to write on the ground in John 8:6. That is not to imply that the omniscient Son of God was illiterate in His incarnation. For the New Testament refers to Jesus reading Scripture aloud (Luke 4:16), and it is hard to imagine Him receiving an education where one is taught to read but not to write.

So if the Bible does not require a Christian to keep a journal (indeed, a person can be both a devoted Christian and yet completely illiterate), and if Jesus did not keep a journal, why do I encourage followers of Jesus to consider journaling and why did I include entire chapters about this practice in some of my books?¹ I recommend to Christians the discipline of keeping a spiritual journal because (1) something very much like journaling is modeled in Scripture, and because (2) believers throughout church history have found journal-keeping so beneficial to their growth in grace.

For as long as I have written on the subject of spiritual disciplines, I have sought to advocate only those disciplines which are taught or modeled in Scripture. Without this God-inspired means

¹See the chapter on “Journaling . . . for the Purpose of Godliness” in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* and the section of six short chapters on journaling on pages 94-105 of *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*.

²Marsden, George M. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003) 474.

³From personal correspondence.

⁴Roberts, Maurice. “Are We Becoming Reformed Men?”, *The Banner of Truth*, Issue 330 (March 1991) 5.

of evaluation, anything and everything that anyone pronounced as profitable for his or her soul could be touted as a spiritual discipline Christians should pursue. Apart from a *Sola Scriptura* standard to guide Christian spirituality, anything from the trivial to the heretical could be claimed as equal in value to personal disciplines as basic as Bible reading and prayer or interpersonal disciplines as important as hearing God's Word preached and participating in the Lord's Supper. And while there may be some intramural debate among Bible-believing Christians about whether certain practices do have scriptural support, it is crucial to recognize the importance of God's Word as the sufficient means for assessing "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Can we say, then, that there is a biblical basis for journaling? While the evidence for it is clearly not as strong as for a personal spiritual discipline like prayer, I believe that something very similar to what has historically been called journaling is found in Scripture by example. In the Psalms, we repeatedly find David writing things such as, "Incline Your ear, O Lord, and answer me; For I am afflicted and needy" (Psalm 86:1). Cries like these are not unlike a believer today writing a heartfelt plea to the Lord in a journal. When, in the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah recorded his Godward feelings about the fall of Jerusalem, he was doing something not very different from the Christian today who types his or her Godward feelings into a word processor file named "Journal." Of course, unlike the words of David and Jeremiah in Scripture, no believer's writings today are divinely inspired. But the example of these men in writing their prayers, meditations, questions, etc., provides scriptural validation for Christians today to do the same.

A second reason I advocate journal-keeping is because of the sanctifying benefits that so many Bible-believing Christians throughout history have attributed to the practice. Jonathan Edwards found the discipline so helpful that he kept journals or notebooks of various kinds. He penned a diary, a five-hundred page journal of "Miscellanies" (basically thoughts on theology),

and enormous notebooks with "Notes on Scripture," "Notes on the Apocalypse," and reflections on "The Mind." A separate collection of "Miscellaneous Observations on Scripture" includes more than ten thousand entries made from 1730 to 1758.² And the first biography published in America—still in print and still powerfully used by the Lord—was primarily a missionary's journal to which Edwards attached a short biography and called it *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*.

I know only one person who keeps a written record of insights into Scripture, prayers, significant life moments, etc., on a scale comparable to Edwards. Unlike Edwards, most journal-keepers—whether they write by hand, on a word processor, in a blog, or some other way—are not daily journalers. Regardless of the frequency of their entries, however, they journal because God blesses them in it and also because it helps them practice other spiritual disciplines found in Scripture. For instance, one friend has told me that he tries to write simply "one key thought" from his Bible reading. He reports that "Some of the most meaningful, the most convicting, the most 'blessing' and reinforcing perspectives I've ever gotten from Bible study have come from my daily journaling process. . . . God has been pleased to bless this discipline in my life, far more than [I] can express."³ As Scottish pastor and author Maurice Roberts put it, "The logic of this practice is inevitable once men have felt the urge to become moulded in heart and life to the pattern of Christ."⁴

So, do you have to keep a spiritual journal? Well, if you are enrolled in my Personal Spiritual Disciplines class at the seminary and you want to pass, the answer is yes. Otherwise, no; journal-keeping is not necessary for Christlikeness. Many of the greatest Christians in history have kept journals, and many equally godly men and women have not. But I urge you to consider whether you might be among those who would find journaling an easy and practical encouragement the Holy Spirit would use in your growth in grace.