

Becoming Church



Five Bible Studies
on Acts 2:42-47

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Introduction

The Book of Acts gives us a fascinating insight into the life, fellowship, and worship of the early church, as it developed post-Pentecost. The six verses that form the backbone of this study are very familiar, often referred to as 'Holy Habits', and are always worth spending a little time with, as they speak to us about our own 'habits' and how they might change, or adapt, to the greater benefit of God's call on us to share our faith and make disciples 'of every nation'.

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

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Cover picture: Ford Madox Brown, Jesus washing Peter's feet (1852-6)

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Learning & Growing Together

Study 1



Fra Angelico, St. Peter preaching in the presence of St. Mark, 1433

Key verse:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship...

The word translated as 'devoted' infers single-mindedness in a course of action. Here it is about concentrating minds on the teaching of the apostles because this is a message about Jesus taught by people with authority, having walked with Jesus, heard his voice, learned from him, felt his touch and the warmth of his friendship. The fledgling church would hear about parables Jesus told, people healed, opposition dealt with, the horror of the cross, the triumph of the Resurrection, and what this meant for the emerging church.

That Luke mentions 'fellowship' in such a way would show that this was a distinctive part of their collective experience, and with over three thousand responding to the message of Peter and the other apostles in those early days, this rapidly expanding community of

believers would create quite an impression on the local population.

The word *koinonia*, used by Luke for 'fellowship' is a favourite word of Paul, and it denotes a real intimacy within the fellowship, as seen by Paul's use of the word to describe 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' (2 Corinthians 13:14).

This was a worshipping community that continued to attend the synagogue and observe the Jewish rites and customs, whilst holding to the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth in God's redemptive plans. Their proclamation of Jesus, as Israel's promised Messiah, would certainly have set them apart within Jerusalem.

Group discussion:

Q) What does the word 'fellowship' mean to you?

Teaching and Learning

Read 2 Timothy 4:1b-3; 1Thessalonians 1:2-7

The importance of sound teaching comes across in Paul's closing words to his 'true son in the faith' (1 Tim 1:2) and faithful helper. He entrusts Timothy with ensuring that the message preached and taught in Ephesus is true to its source, even when faced with fierce opposition from within the church leadership, and if that involves both rebuking some and encouraging others, then so be it.

Paul knows from experience that when demands are great, people will look elsewhere for a 'comfortable' message more suiting their own desires and lifestyles, a real problem in Ephesus when he wrote this letter. Paul writes whilst in prison and facing an uncertain future, but knows he has a willing and reliable helper in Timothy.

The importance of sound teaching had also been an issue in Thessalonica, where Paul, with Silas, and Timothy had established the church. Sometime later, Paul, worried that the believers there were in danger of falling away, sent Timothy back to encourage them.

In this letter Paul writes of his joy in hearing that their faith has stood firm despite trials and challenges, and they are patterning their lives on the example of Paul and his companions, in the same way that he patterned his own life on that of Christ.

Group discussion:

Q) Teaching and learning was important for a growing church. Do you rely solely on a Sunday sermon for this, or have you some ways of engaging with Scripture outside of church?

Q) How does your faith support you when times are hard?

Q) How much has the example of others influenced the development of your own faith?

A Life of Fellowship

Read Hebrews 10:19-25, 13:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

We've already established that Paul was eager that the Word being proclaimed in the church should be true to its roots, and in Hebrews, the writer picks up the same theme, emphasising the priesthood of Christ. Here, he encourages believers to embrace the truth of the Good News shared with them, not only in minds but also in lives, and to take advantage of the privilege of drawing near to God, so graphically offered in the

tearing in two of the temple curtain as Jesus died on the Cross.

They should worship together, enjoy fellowship, love each other as brothers and sister in the faith, meet regularly, encourage hospitality, care for those in need, and put their faith into action as they look toward the day when Christ will return in glory. This was a crucial message for readers who were

seeking something a little less challenging, a more comfortable life in the here and now.

It was not just the ordinary members who needed encouraging, but also the elders among them, and Paul had words for them in his letter to Thessalonica. He asks the fellowship to be gentle with their elders and show respect, as their work could be

demanding. Paul also encourages everyone to play their part in the life and growth of the fellowship, showing patience, encouraging those who are struggling, helping the weak, and striving always to do that which will build up the fellowship.

Group discussion:

Q) How important is meeting together in fellowship, and what we can lose by missing out on this part of church life?

Q) What activity would you like to do as a group that is not currently part of the life of your church?

Q) How can a church fellowship best support those who are in positions of leadership?

Living in Harmony

Read Philippians 2:1-4, Ephesians 4:2-5, Colossians 3:12-14

Engaging in worship and fellowship is important, but as any group of believers get to know each other, there are points at which personalities, ambitions, and opinions can clash, and this was as much of an issue in the early church as it is now. Paul talks of being 'like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.'

Addressing the believers in Philippi, he lists four incentives, based upon their spiritual relationship with Christ, preceded by the word 'if' but assumed to be true. If their hearts are in the right place with their Saviour, then it should show in their relationships with each other.



Fedor Zubov, *Vocation of the Apostles*, 1660

The harmony that Paul longs to see comes from a humility that recognises the true value of all people, and looks not to their own interests and ambitions, but to the interests of others, a radical message for any age. He stresses this in his letter to the fellowship in Ephesus, naming four qualities desirable in a Christian community: humility, gentleness, patience, and love. Writing to the Colossians, he adds compassion and kindness to the list, alongside a willingness to forgive.

Group discussion:

Q) Do we see enough humility shown today, and if not, then why?

Q) How easy is it to achieve that 'like-mindedness' that Paul talks of within a church fellowship, and what can we do to encourage this quality?

Q) If you are visiting a church whilst on holiday, what do you look for in the building and fellowship?

Pause for thought

Spend a few minutes through the week thinking and praying about your own experience of fellowship and what it means to you.

Prayer

Teach us, Servant King
what it is to serve;
to be your hands,
feet and voices in
an unbelieving world.
Teach us, Servant King
what it is to give
not counting cost,
and see the signs
of selfless love unfurled.
Amen

We give thanks for the many saints
who have walked the path we take
and known the joy of your company,
listened to your encouraging words,
stumbled occasionally and fallen,
felt the blows of adversity, and yet
found, within your Spirit, strength to
carry on, knowing that nothing can
separate us from your love. For all
who have, and are, walking this path
of pilgrimage with you and in the
company of others
we offer this, our grateful thanks.
Amen

Breaking Bread Together and Prayer



Luca Giordano, *The Communion of the Apostles*, c1705

Key verse:

They devoted themselves... to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Part of verse 42)

We can understand the reference to 'breaking of bread' in several ways. There was a Jewish custom of pronouncing the blessing and breaking and distribution of bread at the commencement of a meal. There were also daily fellowship meals which developed into the Agape or love feast, a custom developed in the early church as a time of fellowship, and where the Eucharist was often a part (until around 250 AD, when they became separate celebrations.)

Writing in 1815, the author Jonathan Crowther describes the function of the Agape meal as, 'seeking to strengthen the

bonds and the spirit of harmony, goodwill, and congeniality, as well as to forgive past disputes and instead love one another.'

Luke would know that the celebration of the Lord's Supper and fellowship meals were part of the life of the early churches, so his specific mention of breaking bread may signify the Lord's Supper, particularly as in verse 42 three other features – teaching, fellowship, and prayer – may also be spiritual activities.

Group discussion:

Q) Is the Agape, or fellowship meal, something that could be a beneficial part of your own fellowship, and what form could it take?

Breaking Bread Together

Read Mark 14:22-26, 1 Corinthians 10:15-17

While the disciples were together with Jesus for this Passover meal, Jesus takes the unleavened bread, breaks it, and gives it to his disciples with the words, 'This is my body.' The significance of Jesus's action was both in the breaking (his body broken on the Cross) and the distribution of the bread, symbolising the promise of his abiding presence, to be remembered as this act became an essential component of their fellowship in the developing church.

Jesus shares the third cup of the Passover meal, giving thanks (the verb is 'eucharisteo' from which comes our word 'Eucharist'). The cup symbolises the sacrificial offering of his life, and his use of the word 'covenant' emphasises the relationship between God

and all who acknowledge that sacrifice in their hearts and lives. This, says Jesus, is the last Passover meal he will share with them until the kingdom of God is revealed in all its glory.

Paul has been chastising believers for participating in pagan temple festivals, which he considers a dangerous practice, and points them to the spiritual reasons for sharing the bread and wine of the Last Supper. This participation in drinking from the cup and eating the bread shows a continuation of the desire of Jesus, that his disciples would remember his sacrificial offering in this symbolic meal.

Group discussion:

Q) Denominations use a variety of liturgies for the Eucharist, but what does the celebration mean to you as an individual?

Q) Can any meal become a part of our faith experience?

Q) Should a celebration of the Eucharist be a more regular part of our worship?

The Importance of Prayer

Read Acts 17:27-28, Matthew 6:5-13

Acts 17 has Paul engaging with teachers and philosophers in Athens regarding the large number of religious sculptures and other objects of worship in the city. He argues that the four walls of a temple cannot constrain the God who created this world. God gives life and breath to everything and provides for the needs of all people, hoping that they might reach out and find him, 'though he is not far away from any of us.' Our prayer is very much a part of this 'reaching out'

and embracing the relationship that exists between believers and God.

Jesus gives his disciples what we know as the Lord's Prayer. Within Matthew's Gospel, it follows instruction about the act of praying. Jesus assumes his disciples pray regularly, but it's not the location or action that is important, more the motive. He uses the example of those seen and heard on street corners or standing in the synagogue. Their reward comes from the admiration of others.

Jesus's message is that those who pray more in public than private, uttering long, repetitive, and often confusing prayers are more interested in human approval, but God understands our needs, and the language of our hearts, however articulate or not we are, is sufficient.

The framework of the Lord's Prayer reflects their own fellowship as it begins 'Our Father...'. The prayer does not start with self but with God, acknowledging his sovereignty and power in heaven and earth, and looking toward the fulfilment of God's kingdom on earth. Only then it turns to the needs of believers for their daily provision, and a need for forgiveness, guidance, and protection in the daily journey of faith.



Fritz von Uhde, *The Grace Prayer*, 1885

Group discussion:

Q) Can we be guilty of trying to constrain God to the four walls of our worship space, be it cathedral, church, chapel, or community building, and how can we avoid that happening?

Q) Why is the Lord's prayer such a part of our worship today?

Q) Do you use a contemporary or traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, and does it matter?

Praying together

Read James 5:13-16, Acts 12:11-14

Prayer can be both a personal conversation with God and a gathered offering where, with the friendship and security of the fellowship, individuals can share their own needs for prayer and concerns for others known to them.

Within a loving fellowship, says James, we can have the freedom to share joys, sorrows, and sins, and receive the prayerful support of those gathered. This time of prayer can involve songs of praise, anointing with oil and the laying on of hands.

Confessing sins to each other might refer to members of the fellowship who have fallen out, with the mutual confession bringing an opportunity of healing to both parties.

We can glimpse the power of prayer in the passage from Acts with Peter miraculously released from his prison cell. His first thought is to go straight to the home of Mary, the mother of John, one of the early meeting places of the church and presumably a substantial building, where Peter finds a room full of people in prayer.

We can see that he was the centre of their thoughts and prayers by the behaviour of the servant Rhoda, who is so excited at hearing his voice outside that she forgets to let him in before dashing to tell the others!

Group discussion:

Q) How easy is it to share your own need of prayer within the wider fellowship, and could the church do anything to help?

Q) Have you had your own 'Rhoda' experience, with the shock of an answered prayer?

Q) How much time does your fellowship spend together in prayer, and is it enough to experience the benefits that James talks about?

Pause for thought

Take a few minutes in the week thinking about that act of breaking and sharing bread, and what it means to your faith.

Prayer

Bread of Life, you feed us
through word and sacrament.
The bread we share
a remembrance
of your presence with us.
Strengthen us for service,
that seeds we sow
in fertile places
might grow and flourish,
that food we share
in fellowship
might nourish and revive,
that words we share
in our daily walk
might glorify your name.
Bread of Life, you feed us
through word and sacrament
that we might feed others.
Blessed be your name!

When the journey is long
and we hunger and thirst,
Bread of Life, you sustain us.
When the road is hard
and our bodies weak
Bread of Life, you heal us.
When our spirits are low
and we can't carry on
Bread of Life, you revive us.
When we offer our hand
in love and in service
Bread of life, you bless us.
When the challenge is great
and the workers are few
Bread of Life, you empower us.
When the victory is won
and we see your face
Bread of Life, you will rejoice with us!

Study 3

God's Power at Work



Raphael, *The Healing of the Lame Man*, 1515

Key verse:

⁴³ *Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.*

Whilst thinking particularly about the fellowship of the early believers in Jerusalem, this verse opens the field of view a little to say that following Peter's Pentecost speech, resulting in around 3000 people being added to the smaller group of believers already in the city, the whole population were now aware of what was happening, even if from the side-lines. They heard or watched what was going on around them and were amazed at the 'wonders and signs' happening in the presence of the apostles.

Luke possibly wants to remind his readers that wherever Jesus went, there were also miracles displaying God's power. Peter had

earlier put it this way, 'Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.' (Acts 2:22)

These signs were now continuing through the apostles, echoing Joel's prophesy of the Spirit being poured out, 'Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and the earth...' (Joel 2:29-30a)

Group discussion:

Q) Were 'signs and wonders' unique to the early church, or something that we should have the faith to expect now?

Spiritual gifts

Read Luke 9:1-6, Hebrews 2:1-4

The apostles were not only fully aware of God's power revealed through Jesus's actions and words, but would no doubt remember being sent out themselves, essentially as trainees, to not only proclaim the good news about Jesus but to offer healing to those who were ill. They were to take nothing with them, trusting God to supply their needs through the people in the towns they stayed within, and received from Jesus both the power and authority to do these things.

This was an important part of Luke's message when he came to write about the early church in Acts, offering validation of the apostles' miraculous power.

The disciples returned to Jesus excited at all they had seen, and this experience of both the provision and power of God's Spirit would form a part of their teaching to the churches they would help form and lead.

In Hebrews, the writer is in the middle of arguing the importance of Jesus and the salvation which he brought and taught about, confirmed by the testimony of those who were there. Therefore, you can believe this message with confidence, he argues. Not only that, he adds, but God himself has also testified to it, through empowerment of his apostles and others, and signs, wonders and miracles.

Group discussion:

Q) Is training just for the church leader, or would it also help empower others in the fellowship to play a greater part? If so, what kind of training would you like to see offered?

Q) Spiritual gifts seem to have more of an emphasis in some denominations' teaching than others. Why should that be an issue, do you think?

Q) How important are the spiritual and faith experiences of others in your fellowship to the development of your own faith, and in what ways?

Putting into practice

Read John 14:12-14, Acts 20:7-12

Jesus told his disciples that the time would come when they would be his representatives in the world when he was no longer with them and be able to do even more in his name. They had to realise that Jesus's death would not mean the disbanding of the group, but the expansion of the work, through the power of Spirit.

The proof of this was seen after Peter's sermon at Pentecost, when we hear of more converts than the total recorded during Jesus's active ministry, as the fledgling church expanded throughout the Roman world.



Paul raising Eutychus to life anon, 1728

Acts 20 gives us a glimpse inside the early church in the ancient Greek city of Troas. Luke describes the believers gathering one evening in an upstairs room to break bread and allow an opportunity for Paul to deliver what appears to have been a very long session of teaching. For whatever reason, a young man called Eutychus nods off to sleep and falls out of a window. By the time the others rush outside to his aid, he is dead.

Paul lays not only his hands but his whole body on the young man, who miraculously is brought back to life. Remarkably, they all return upstairs, have a midnight snack, and continue listening to Paul until dawn, whereupon they escort the young man home!

Group discussion:

Q) It was the disciples who carried Jesus's story and message beyond the Cross. So, who has that responsibility now, ordained ministers or all who think of themselves as followers, disciples, of Jesus?

Q) Does your church have house or cell groups meeting in people's homes, and if so, what do you get from those often-smaller fellowship groups?

Q) How do you view the reported miraculous healing which Luke, traditionally believed to be a physician, writes so vividly about in Acts?

Recognising our gifts

Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, Ephesians 4:4-7,11-13

When Paul talks to the Corinthian church of 'the body of Christ', he is not referring to the church in one place, but has the whole Christian church in mind, as he talks of apostles and prophets in the plural. Paul is quite clear that it is God who equips and empowers his church, whether it is in leadership or in a more supportive role.

Whilst the leadership roles of apostles, prophets and teachers are important, and certainly higher profile than some gifts listed, the fact is that all gifts (including many not mentioned here) are critical within the body of the church. There is no ranking to be seen, no one has all the gifts, and what the church needs is a balanced mix of gifts and ministries for it to function and thrive.

We can misunderstand the last verse, about eagerly desiring the 'greater gifts', as Paul

had been addressing the way believers were using, and misusing, the gift of tongues. Far better might be to think of 'greater' or 'best' to be that gift that is most applicable to the situation at hand.

Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul emphasises the closeness between God (Father, Son and Spirit) and the church, where both Jewish and Gentile believers were part of the same body, with their differences reconciled in Christ, who has enabled apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. And this is to equip or prepare all God's people for service, which is what unites all members of the body of Christ.

Group discussion:

Q) How do you see God's gifts displayed within the church, both locally and perhaps more globally?

Q) Read Ephesians 4:7 again. How does it speak to you about the church fellowship?

Q) Should we be more 'eagerly desiring' God's spiritual gifts, as Paul encourages the fellowship in Corinth to do?

Pause for thought

Take a few minutes through the week to think about the blessing you have found within your own fellowship, and whether God is calling you to become, with help, more involved.

Prayer

We light a candle,
and enjoy the flickering light ,
the fragrance
and warmth it creates.
But without the spark that ignites,
there will be no flame.
Without the wax,
the source of power,
the wick will not burn.
Without the flame,
there will be no fragrance,
no warmth, no light.
And so with us, Lord.
You are the catalyst that ignites us,
and the fuel that sustains us.
You fill us with your fragrance
as you enter our lives.
You empower us
to carry your flame in our hearts,
to be the fragrance, warmth,
and light of your love,
in this dark world.

For the Spirit of Peace
that calms our mind
and stills our life,
we give you thanks.

For the Spirit of Love
that touches hearts
and reaches out,
we give you thanks.

For the Spirit of Joy
that lifts our soul
and gives us faith
we give you thanks.

For the Spirit of Power,
that gift of grace
for this your church,
we give you thanks.

Study 4

A Sense of Community



Ford Madox Brown, Jesus washing Peter's feet, 1852-6

Key verses:

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Luke, who is our guide to the early church, knew there was something positive happening among the new believers, a developing sense of what 'community' really meant. This was not unique, but different.

The Dead Sea Scrolls tell us something about the Jewish Sect of Essenes (with around 4000 members), where the community living in the desert lived without private property and shared everything in common. Greek sects such as the Pythagoreans rejected private property.

What Luke tells us is that these early Christians shared what they had with the community, and if necessary, would sell property to meet a need, going much further than was the norm in and around Jerusalem.

There is also a possibility that although major persecution of Christians was still to happen, they might soon see sanctions appear, and this drawing together in communal life might be an early response to these pressures. History informs us that persecution of minority groups is not uncommon.

Group discussion:

Q) Have you experience of your local community, in and outside of church, working together to meet a particular need?

Q) Should the church be actively looking to meet needs within the local area in which it is based, and if local resources are poor, in what other ways might it help?

A true fellowship

Read John 17:20-23, 1 John 1:3-7

Told by Jesus that he would shortly be 'leaving the world and going back to the Father', the disciples struggled to understand what the implications would be for them, as Jesus obviously had plans for them. He prays for his disciples, but also for everyone who will believe the truth and life that they will shortly be sharing.

Jesus knows that at this moment, the disciples are both confused and weak, but this is temporary. He prays for the unity of all believers, bound by the love of God, which will be their testimony to the world of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

And that was the miracle, post-Pentecost, that convinced so many that the message in the disciples' words and lives was from

God and would influence the way of life and fellowship in the early church.

In his letter to a struggling group of believers in 1 John, the author insists that the apostles only shared what they had seen and heard as they followed Jesus, so that everyone might enjoy the fellowship they experience, 'with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ'.

The word used for 'fellowship' (koinonia) is common in the New Testament but difficult to translate fully, referring as it does to the supernatural life that Christians share. And it is this 'fellowship with us', he says, that is the signature life of the whole fellowship of believers as they live in the light and knowledge of God.

Group discussion:

Q) Could the disciples have carried on the work they did without their Pentecost experience, and do we give enough thought to the Holy Spirit in our daily lives?

Q) What conclusion do you hope visitors might take away with them after joining you for worship?

Q) How would you describe Christian fellowship to someone who asks?

Caring for one another

Read Deuteronomy 15:7-8, Matthew 25:34-40

In Deuteronomy chapter 15, Moses talks of a day for cancelling all debts, at the end of every seven years. But in the same chapter, we find him saying that you really don't have to wait for a particular year to show generosity or mercy to a fellow Israelite in their time of need, as it should be a natural response. Moses tells them not to be tight-

fisted, but open-handed, and God would bless their compassion and generosity.

Matthew shared many of Jesus's sayings and parables, in this chapter mostly about the end times and his coming again in glory. He talks of sheep and goats, a time of judgement. But the message is for the

present time and the future, concerning the way of life of those who count themselves part of his flock. Jesus talks of 'the nations' rather than the more 'one nation' message of Moses, and the inference may be that our attitude to the needs of the world, rather than just the fellowship, reflects the way we serve God. That the people in the story seem unclear when they have done the right thing suggests it may simply have been their natural response, who they are.

Group discussion:

Q) Is there a balance to be had between financial generosity and having 'enough' in our lives, and where do we draw a line?

Q) Moses wanted an 'open-handed' rather than 'tight-fisted' approach to life. What do you think he meant by that?

Love at the heart of life

Read Luke 10:25-29, 1 John 3:17, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

Questioned by an expert in the law about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks for the expert's summary, which comes back as loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbour as you would yourself. But that begs the question 'who do we call our neighbour?', and the remaining discourse is the well-known story of the Good Samaritan who, rather than the priest and Levite who walked past, stopped at the side of the road to ask the man lying there if he needed help, probably tore his own clothes to make bandages, used his oil to clean the wounds, took him to an inn and paid for his care, promising more if needed.

This was the good neighbour, the man whose natural response was a sacrificial offering of love. And that, says Jesus, is the answer to your question.

The message from 1 John is blunt and to the point, as the author provides a practical 'test' of faith. It states that if God's love is indeed in our hearts, then it reveals itself in our willingness to show both generosity and compassion in our daily lives wherever we see a 'brother or sister' in need. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, emphasises the importance of love being at the heart of a believer's faith and life, and by inference, that of the whole fellowship.



Van Gogh, *The Good Samaritan*, 1890

Group discussion:

Q) Who do you think of as your 'neighbour' and why?

Q) What is your natural reaction to the beggar that you approach along the shopping street, and what is the first thought that comes to mind?

Q) Our opening verse talks of the fellowship having 'everything in common'. Can this extend beyond the monetary and physical, and in what way?

Pause for thought

Spend a few minutes this week just thinking and praying for all those whose income is so small that they are forced to borrow, often at high interest rates, and face spiralling debt problems. Remember organisations such as Christians Against Poverty (CAP) who help people who find themselves in situations such as this.

A Prayer

Lord God, help us to love those
whom we find it difficult to love.
Give us a heart that reaches out
to those we would otherwise ignore.
Give us the strength not to cross
on the other side of the road,
but to play the part of the Samaritan.
This will not be easy, Lord.
It is not in our nature.
We spread our love thinly
among those we can relate to,
those who share our values,
and those who do not threaten
our comfortable lifestyle.

It's not easy, Lord,
and on our own we shall fail.
But with your help all things are possible.
You led the way,
and it is your example that we look to.
You turned the values of this world upside
down.
Do the same with us, Lord.
Help us live the reality of your Love.
Amen

Study 5

An Outward-Looking Church



Tissot, Jesus walks in Portico of Solomon, c1890

Key verses:

⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet as a group in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Luke tells us elsewhere that early believers enjoyed meeting together at the eastern edge of the outer court, known as Solomon's Colonnade, where, in typical Jewish fashion, they would discuss matters of faith and offer worship to God. As Jews, they not only considered Jerusalem to be their city, but the temple to be their sanctuary.

However, they also shared meals in their homes with elements of worship and prayer. Their joy overflowed into every element of daily life.

At this point in the development of the early church their newly found faith and way of life was seen in a positive light by the rest of the population, and indeed we are told that every day people heard what was being said, believed and joined the growing fellowship of believers in Jerusalem.

But sadly, this would soon change, with increasing opposition and persecution, as Luke relates later in Acts.

Group discussion:

Q) How is the local church perceived in your area, and how connected with the community? Would you like to see changes?

Q) How important to you is the building where you gather for worship?

Jesus Christ and the church

Read Ephesians 2:17-22, 1 Peter 2:9-10

Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, a mix of Jews and Gentiles, Paul is keen to stress that through Jesus, everyone has access to God the Father by one Spirit. They can all enjoy the privileges of belonging to a fellowship of believers with a faith built on a firm foundation, laid down by both apostles and prophets, and with Christ as the chief cornerstone, the one that binds walls together, and makes for a building fit for the Holy Spirit to live within.

In the East, people considered the cornerstone more important than the foundation, and often had a royal name inscribed upon it. Jesus Christ is not only at the heart of the church, but the stone that holds it together, its strength and power.

Paul, in his letter to Peter, applies various terms to the church that were originally used to describe Israel, such as a 'chosen people', a 'royal priesthood', and a 'holy nation'. It is not that the church might replace Israel in God's plans, but that the church connects with the Old Testament and sees within it evidence for the coming of Jesus for all nations.

It was always God's plan to bless the entire world through the nation of Israel, and the church is now a part of that bigger picture, bringing the message of Jesus to all people.

Group discussion:

Q) How does the church reach out to the current generation growing up, who have perhaps no family connection with church and faith?

Q) How does the thought of Christ as the cornerstone speak into your own faith experience?

A worshipping people

Read Revelation 1:4-6, Hebrews 10:19-22

In the opening words of Revelation, the author is addressing seven representative churches in the Roman province of Asia (now the western side of Turkey). Jews considered seven to be the number of completeness, and here they represent the variety of obedience and disobedience in the church that were common then and in generations following.

His greeting comes in the name of Father, Spirit, and Son, with Jesus Christ described as 'the faithful witness', a reference to his faithful obedience and witness to God's kingdom and



Jerusalem Sepulchre, photo Berthold Werner

salvation, even to the point of death. It is through the salvation that Jesus offered through his sacrifice that the church finds the power to become the 'holy nation' and priesthood that Paul talked of earlier, and worship is a fitting offering in response.

The writer of Hebrews follows the same theme, in saying that because of the truth he has taught them about Jesus, and the salvation that Jesus brought, those who call

themselves believers should live their lives according to those truths, drawing near to God with sincere hearts and with the full assurance that the worship and prayer they bring is an acceptable offering.

Group discussion:

Q) What do you see as the key elements of worship?

Q) A key doctrine of protestant churches is 'the priesthood of all believers', echoed in the verses from Revelation. What does that phrase mean to you?

Q) Truth is often a vague word in politics, but how do you see it in the Bible?

An outward-looking church

Read Matthew 28: 16-20, Romans 10:11-15, Acts 16:6-10

At the very start of his own mission, Jesus sent the disciples out with instructions to go to the local Jewish villages and towns and teach, minister, and heal. It was very much on-the-job training, with some limitations, but they came back excited at what they had seen, and for Jesus this was proof enough that eventually they would become the apostles who would become the planters of the early church. Now, at the end of Matthew's narrative, we have their commissioning, a call to 'make disciples of all nations.' Disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey the teaching of Jesus.

That call would apply, as it still does, both to those like Paul, called to travel far and wide, and those who will stay nearer to home and spread the Good News. And the promise is that for those who follow their calling, Jesus will be with them in Spirit 'to the very end of the age.'

In the opening words of Romans 10, Paul admits that at the heart of his own call as an apostle is the desire for all the Israelites to be saved but adds that the Good News is for all people, regardless of race, saying, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' This is not a limited-issue offer, but the messengers are still few, and how can people believe if they have not been told?

'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

At the heart of the early church was a desire to share the good news, both locally and further afield. It was by sharing, by becoming an outward-looking fellowship of believers that they achieved that which Luke reports, 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

Group discussion:

Q) What do we need to enable us to share our faith with confidence?

Q) Congregations are often small today. How can a small group become mission-minded?

Q) What has looking at the life of the early church taught you?

Pause for thought

Spend some time this week praying for the worldwide Church of God, of which we are all a part. Pray particularly for those Christians who daily face persecution, that they might find strength in adversity.

Prayer

Help us, with simple words,
to explain the warmth
within our hearts
that we experienced
in that first encounter
with your love and grace -
the Spirit's flame,
still burning bright within -
that others, in their own
journeys of discovery
might reach out and touch
the hand that's always there,
and be embraced by love.

You call us to leave all things,
you who had nothing.
You call us to be servants,
you who came to serve.
You call us to share the load,
you who carried our sin.
You call us to speak your word,
you who lived it daily.
You call us to be followers,
and in your strength, we will.

Using images prayerfully

There are quite a few images within these studies, and you may like to try this prayerfully with any of them. It is called *Visio Divina*, or 'Divine seeing' and all it requires is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at the images, what the artist might say to us, even putting ourselves into the artwork, and allow God to speak to us.



Ford Maddox Brown, *Jesus washing Peter's feet* (1852-6)

There are four stages of *Visio Divina*, assuming we are relaxed, quiet and with a copy of the picture in front of us

1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colours, people, places, and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms, and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

References

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