

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.

SAMPLE

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?

SAMPLE

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

SAMPLE

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