

# Known in Community

## Vision for Community

In Acts chapter 16, we see the beginning of the Christian church in a city called Philippi.

The apostle Paul goes to Philippi and meets some local folks and begins preaching the gospel and reasoning with them from the Scriptures, and the church of Philippi is born.

The first converts in this Roman metropolis were a fashion mogul from Turkey, a blue collar Roman family, and a young Greek woman who had been exploited her whole life by pagan priests as a fortune teller. They had each been converted through reason, a miracle, and spiritual deliverance, respectively. Imagine joining that Bible study!

How would an independently wealthy woman mix with these folks from lower socioeconomic classes? How would a young woman abused by men in authority interact with a soldier who is a head of household and overseeing a prison? How was a formerly-pagan jailor supposed to get along with an Asian mogul? Paul didn't seem worried about it.

And this wasn't a one-off occurrence. We see this happening again and again in the New Testament in city after city. This is the beauty of the church—people from wildly different backgrounds who would not have chosen to befriend one another unite. They come together and they build meaningful relationships around the one thing that changes everything—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Jesus' Vision for Community

In his life and ministry, we can see Jesus' own vision for the church. Once, he was teaching in a crowded house and his family heard about it. His mom and brothers went down to the house to talk some sense into him and tell him to come home.

In that culture, family was everything. If you were doing something that made your family look bad, they would call you home, even as an adult. To reject your family was an unthinkable sin. The eldest brother's entire life was about taking over the family business or furthering the family's wealth and reputation.

And Jesus—who was the eldest brother in his family—had left home and his father’s profession to walk around the region and preach about the kingdom of God. His family wasn’t immediately on board.

So Mary and Jesus’ siblings went down to the house where he was teaching and some people said, “Hey, Jesus, your mom and siblings are outside calling for you.”

He looked at this room of people and said to them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?”

For you and I that seems like an innocuous question, but imagine the discomfort and confusion in the room. “What do you mean, Jesus? The people outside. Your mom is Mary. Your brother is James. They’re all out there. We know who they are. That’s your clan, and you need to mind your manners!”

Then he said this. This is from Mark chapter 3:

*Here are my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.*

Now in a culture that valued family as everything, that is a deep proclamation. The rest of the New Testament picks up this metaphor of the church as family. In fact, the language most frequently used to talk about the church is family language. This image of family is an incredibly powerful way to grasp what God wants for us in Christian community.

It’s both profound and practical. Family sticks around no matter what. Family calls you out and then helps you get through hard times. But family also helps in small and significant ways. When you’re sick, your family takes care of you. Your family picks you up at the airport at 1AM. Family comes to the rescue if your car breaks down on the highway in the middle of a snowstorm.

That’s the kind of community the church is called to be. We are a family that is bound together, not by DNA, but by the blood of Christ.

In Romans 8, Paul wrote:

*Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”*

In his letter to the Galatians, he wrote that God sent Jesus, his perfect son...

*...to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.*

In the first letter we have from the Apostle John, we read:

*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are!*

John's letter is so emphatic about the familial love of the church that he presses home the point that we who belong to Christ are to love one another as Jesus has loved us. In chapter 3, verse 16, he says:

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

So where do we start to learn to love like this? We start with our new family.

Why is family the main way Scripture talks about the community of Christ?

Well, it's because we learn from our families. We learn how to live. We learn how to relate to other people, to engage conflict, and to manage our emotions—or not. Family is the place we learn what it means to belong to society. It's where we develop our view of self, our view of God, our cultural identity, our values, and our often-implicit and -unconscious ways we engage the world.

Whatever lessons we learned growing up, Jesus has given us this new family—*his* family—where we can unlearn together our previous limited and broken and incomplete patterns and relearn together *his* way—the way of love.

## **Community in Practice**

What does that look like? We've covered elsewhere how there are different levels of safety and trust in different spheres of our relational world, so at this point in the discipleship pathway, let's talk about *community*. By that, we mean the fifteen (or so) people you most regularly spend time with.

Take a moment to think: Who are your community? Who are your go-to people? Who do you call to take you to the airport? Do you have people in your life who know your worst and still stick around? Do you feel safe sharing your struggles?

While there is certainly biblical community outside of formal church-based groups, at Reality LA, we have created community groups as our formal way of facilitating this kind of community and building meaningful relationships where we can grow in Christ and invite others to follow him.

Each community group looks different, because they are made up of different people from varied backgrounds and in various stages of life. However, each of them is practicing what it means to live in the vision of the church we heard from Mark's gospel—as a family of disciples on mission with Jesus.

### *Reflect*

Who would you consider your community—those with whom you share time and life experiences? How are they influencing your spiritual health?

## Sharing to Heal

Loving one another in a context of community can be a complex thing, and the New Testament letters are full of intricate application of Jesus' greatest commandment. So let's get practical.

In the beginning of the Book of Acts we see a description of how early Christians were spending their time together. Let's look at Acts 2:42, 44-47.

*“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers....And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*

We've spoken elsewhere about owning and sharing our stories as a place to begin knowing one another, and this passage gives us several more rich practices for being known in community. At first glance, there is a lot is going on here. There is a *lot* going on here. However, the author of the book has repeated a few things to make sure we get the point.

First, let's look at the context of all of this activity.

### Sharing Life

“They devoted themselves to...the fellowship.” “Fellowship” is just another word for “community” so we'll be using those interchangeably.

It says they were also “together and had all things in common,” “selling their possessions” and “day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes,” receiving “food with glad and generous hearts.”

What we're seeing here is that they were sharing life. That's how we talk about it at Reality LA. Whether you're in a community group or not, you can share life with fellow followers of Jesus. This is more than getting together once a week for a Bible study. That's surely part of it, but it's more than that. It means committing to one another in a way that impacts the whole week.

Check it out. They were “breaking bread” together. Bread is mentioned twice in this passage, as well as receiving food. This is an indicator that they were eating meals as part of sharing life.

So, when you think of sharing life in community, think of meals.

Meals are a place where we come together to share our stories and experiences. We share a common faith together in Jesus who has changed everything, and so we share life, and meals are a simple but profound way to do that.

### **Speaking Truth**

Now, you may have noticed that I skipped the first line of the passage, that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” I skipped this at first because I wanted to get into the context of where the early believers were doing this.

For these early Christians here in Acts 2, they had the apostles right in front of them, teaching them from the Scripture and sharing the lessons that Jesus himself had given to them. Christians still dedicate ourselves to learning the apostles’ teaching and now we do that in the Bible—the core of which is the gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ.

Like prayer, bringing the gospel to bear on all of life is something we need to learn together. It’s together that we lovingly speak truth. We speak the truth of God, learning to apply the gospel and the truths of the gospel into every area of our lives.

Many of us are afraid that if people actually knew our hearts they would reject us. But the gospel creates an authentic community where I can be known and accepted. Where I can look into his word, learn his truth, and be honest about my response. Where I can abide in the love of Christ by learning the good news so thoroughly that I begin to interpret all of life through its truths.

We study our Bibles, confess sin, and remind one another of the gospel continually as our faith begin to renew the way we think about our jobs, talk about our spouses, comfort grieving friends, discuss politics, and on and on.

## Praying and Meeting Needs

Next we see that “they devoted themselves to the prayers” and, later in this section, it says that they “received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.” Prayer is something we do all the time, everywhere. It’s at the heart of Christian community. We’ve already learned that prayer is our response to God’s movement, and we see that here too. In response to hearing the gospel and being together and sharing meals and hearing the apostles teaching and learning it well—we spend time together, learning together, receiving together, and praying together.

The early Christians were dedicated to prayer, and we dedicate ourselves to prayer too.

As a family of disciples, we continue this practice. We pray for and with one another, knowing that every good thing comes from God our Father, and he is the one who can and will meet our deepest needs. No matter where we are, no matter who we are with, no matter how much time we have—we pray.

I encourage you to ask your community for prayer. This can be hard—it might feel vulnerable or selfish—but it’s part of how we are known in community, grow to bear one another’s burdens, continue to love one another, witness to others, and make our needs known.

As the believers were eating their meals together, learning the truths of the gospel, and praying, something miraculous was flowing out of them. They had all things in common. They were selling their possessions. They were distributing the proceeds to all as any had need, and they were receiving the food with glad and generous hearts.

This is what a community saturated with the love of Christ will look like. Knowing that everything they had was from God, they loved like Jesus and gave sacrificially to make sure everyone in the community was taken care of.

In the death and resurrection of Christ, the Father threw the doors of the kingdom wide open, holding nothing back from us. As his followers, we are called to love one another in the same way.

At Reality LA, we call this “meeting needs.”

There are many needs in our community: emotional, relational, material, practical, spiritual, and otherwise. So whether it's cooking meals for one another, helping someone move a couch, or sitting on that same couch to weep with a friend, we are a people who meet one another's needs.

By seeking to meet the holistic needs of everyone in our community, we show the love of Christ among us and glorify our Father in heaven.

Wait...so what about the "mission" part of being "a family of disciples on mission with Jesus"?

Well, look at this:

*...having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

They received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor. The great thing about these four practices we've been exploring—sharing life, speaking truth, praying, and meeting needs—is that we can do them anytime, anywhere. As we learn to do them together in our community, we become more ready to do them in our workplaces, social circles, and other spheres of influence.

When we bring other students or neighbors over for birthday parties and housewarmings, we invite them to interact with this kind of community—a community that speaks truth, prays expectantly, shares life, and meets one another's needs! And by this faithful love between and overflowing from us, we bear witness to the kingdom of God, and the gospel goes out to our neighbors and the nations.

*Reflect*

Which of these community practices come more naturally to you? Which practices take a little more work? Why?

## Power in Community

Think back to the beginning of that church in Philippi—how could an upper class woman, a middle class family, and lower class girl from wildly different backgrounds form healthy relationships and bear witness to the glory of Jesus Christ in a city that knew nothing about him? It seems unlikely.

But imagine this group of individuals being so changed by the gospel that they were free to commit themselves to loving one another in all of life because having Jesus in common was more powerful than any of their differences. No formal agreements were made, no schedules were laid out—Paul simply got them together and they begin to share life, speak truth, pray together, and meet needs.

By doing these things day-by-day, they built meaningful relationships and their community grew as more people heard the gospel and were delivered from the kingdom of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

It still took work, of course. Relationships always do, and we see throughout the New Testament that this kind of family can be quite difficult. What the church at Philippi had was not simple, surface diversity, but unity amidst their diversity, created by grace, and empowered by the beauty and inclusivity of the universal invitation of Jesus to heal and grow people. We can expect this to be a challenging process, but it will also be worth it.

Writing to the church in Philippi over a decade after first preaching the gospel in that city, Paul wrote this:

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*

Whether you’ve been a Christian for decades or are just beginning your walk with Christ, I thank my God for your investment—through sharing life, speaking truth, prayer, and meeting needs—in meaningful relationship and your partnership in the ministry of the gospel.

I thank God that you and I are part of this family.

## *Reflect*

What is the most tight-knit community you've ever been part of? What made it so tight? What was your contribution to that community?