

# **Known in Community**

## **The World's Wildest Bible Study**

In the biblical book of Acts, chapter 16, we see the beginning of the Christian church in a city called Philippi. This was a Roman city—very few people there were familiar with Israel's One True God and his promise to deliver the world from sin and death through the Messiah. Paul 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 of Asian background, a blue collar family of Roman background, and a young woman of Greek background being exploited by pagan priests as a fortune teller. They had each been converted through reason, deliverance, and witnessing a miracle, respectively. Imagine joining that bible study!

How would an independently wealthy woman mix with these folks from lower on the socioeconomic ladder? How would a young woman abused by men in authority interact with a soldier who oversaw 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. 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 varied backgrounds who would not have chosen to befriend one another unite and 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. 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, remember—has 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 said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

Imagine the discomfort and confusion in the room. "What do you mean, Jesus? Your mom is Mary, and she's right outside with James and the whole clan and you need to mind your manners!"

Then he said this—I'm reading from Mark 3:

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

Now, that's deep. The rest of the New Testament picks up this metaphor of the church as family. In fact, the language it most frequently uses to talk to and 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 it. But family also helps out in other small but 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 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:

*[T]hose 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, he wrote:

*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 emphatic about the familial love of the church. He presses home the point that we who belong to Christ are to love one another as he 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.*

That's a wonderful and high calling. And, as we just saw in Romans, it requires the power of the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and to live into our new identity.

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

## Family Teaches

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

Well, we learn a lot from our families of origin. We learn how to relate to others, engage conflict, and manage our emotions. Family is the place we learn what it means to belong to society. Where we develop our view of self, view of God, cultural identity, values, and the often-implicit and -unconscious ways we engage the world.

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

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?

## Practices of Community

Loving one another in a context like this is a complex thing, but in the New Testament letters we see the application of Jesus' great 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 previously 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, it looks like a lot is going on here. There was a lot going on. 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...fellowship” is another way of saying ‘community.’ Those who followed Jesus were committed to participating in life together. It says they were “together and had all things in common” and they were “day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes.”

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 bible study. It means committing to one another in a way that impacts our whole week.

Notice that breaking bread is mentioned twice in this passage. Meals are a huge part of life, and they become a simple, rich way we share life together. We share in

a common faith in Jesus who has changed everything, and so we share life with each other. We share meals, stories, and experiences.

### **Speaking Truth**

By now you've noticed that I skipped the first line of the passage, that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" because I wanted to first demonstrate the context in which the early believers were doing this.

For these Christians here in Acts 2, they had the apostles right in front of them, teaching them from the Scriptures and sharing the lessons they had learned from Jesus himself. Christians still dedicate ourselves to learning the apostles' teaching, which is found in the Bible—the core of which is the gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ.

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 still accepted.

We seek to abide in the love of Christ by learning this good news so thoroughly that we 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 to our spouses, comfort grieving friends, discuss politics, and more.

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 the truth, learning to apply the gospel and the teachings of the Bible to every circumstance.

### **Praying**

Okay, let's look at the next practice here. "They devoted themselves to prayer" and, later in this section, it says that they "received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God." Prayer is 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 being together, learning together, and receiving together, the early Christians were dedicated to prayer.

As a family of disciples, we continue this practice today. 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, who we are with, or 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.

### **Meeting Needs**

As the believers were eating meals together, learning the truths of the gospel, and praying, something miraculous was flowing out of them. They had all things in common, sold their possessions to give to anyone who had need, and, even as they were eating together, they had glad and generous hearts.

This is the mark of a community saturated with the love of Christ. Knowing that everything they had was from God, they loved like Jesus and gave sacrificially to make sure everyone was taken care of. Following Jesus together means *meeting needs* together.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, 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.

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 with them on that same couch to listen to their pain, 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:

*...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.*

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 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 our community—a community that speaks truth, prays expectantly, shares life, and meets 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?

## Being Known in a New Family

So getting back to the beginning of the church in Philippi—how could an upper class woman, middle class man, and lower class girl from wildly different backgrounds form healthy relationships and bear witness to the glory of Jesus Christ? It seemed 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 could be quite difficult. What the church at Philippi had was not simple, surface diversity, but unity amidst diversity, created by grace, and empowered by the beauty and inclusivity of the universal invitation of Jesus to heal and to grow. 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 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?