

*Discipleship 101: Study Buddies*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Proverbs 18:24, Philippians 3:20-4:8, 1 John 1*

Today's final Scripture reading is 1 John 1. Listen now to God's Word. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."

I'm not a channel surfer, but there are a couple of movies that always catch my attention when they're on TV. One of them is **Stand and Deliver**. It's the true story of Jaime Escalante, who taught mathematics at a failing high school in a Hispanic suburb of Los Angeles. At first, he was aghast that they didn't know even the basics. But he quickly saw the kids' potential. Against the advice of many, Jaime offered a calculus class so that his students could take AP placement exams and qualify for the scholarships they'd have to have to afford college.

It was incredibly hard work, but the class became a big family. They studied before school, after school, and at each others' homes. Jaime and his wife cooked dinners while the students wrapped their minds around their homework. Despite the overwhelming pressures to drop out, to join the gangs, to work the family business, they all made it to the AP exam. In fact, their scores were so good, their mistakes so alike, the testing service thought they had somehow cheated...until the whole class was able to pass the exam again a few months later. Within a few years, that school had almost 90 kids a year passing the AP Calculus exam. Their success could be attributed to one great teacher and their hard work together as a community...as a fellowship.

Fellowship in the American church means a lot of things...socializing in the fellowship hall, potlucks and festivals, sometimes a movie. Occasionally fellowship happens during a service project, like delivering Head Start backpacks or Crop Walk. But for the most part, fellowship is a part of our special events, something we do to have fun as a group. But that got me to thinking...is biblical fellowship similar to what we do? Is it more like Jaime Escalante's students gathering together regularly to learn and grow? Is it a combination of the two? As disciples following Jesus, what does fellowship look like biblically?

When I started looking for the word “fellowship” in the Old Testament, I was surprised to find that the word doesn’t exist in Hebrew. The closest term is *qahal* or “assembly,” which in Greek became the word we know as “synagogue.” In some translations of Scripture, one of the sacrificial offerings made to God is called a “fellowship” offering. In Hebrew, it’s literally a *shalom* or peace offering. However, what always accompanied a peace offering was fellowship. The family who presented the offering was allowed to eat part of it, but it had to be eaten within a day’s time, so family and friends were invited to be a part of the celebration of peace.

Why wasn’t there a term for fellowship in Hebrew? I believe it’s because the very fact of being called out as God’s people made the Israelites unique. They were kin – interrelated families. Closeness was assumed and hospitality was expected. Yet God still called them to have feasts and festivals – over a dozen each year. God regularly brought these families, who would have already been close by blood, together to celebrate, to remember and honor Him. Between the Sabbath, the synagogue, and participation in the festivals, when the Jewish people weren’t tending their crops or herds, they were fellowshiping. Because God was the center of the Jewish community, fellowship and assembling as the people of God were identical.

That changes in the New Testament era. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ opened up salvation and worship of the true God to all who would believe in Him. But many Gentiles had little experience like that of the Jewish people. They had families and festivals, but close-knit community was not always a part of it. What’s more, when you became a Christian, whether you were a Jew or a Gentile, often you were kicked out of your family. You had rejected the old ways and were no longer accepted by your community. You were on your own.

The picture we see in the New Testament, then, is of the church becoming the family. They saw one another daily. They ate together regularly, at least once a week if not more often. They learned Scripture together and worshipped together throughout the week. They still did their daily work, but their lives became focused on Jesus Christ and on the fellowship of believers where they lived.

But fellowship has never been easy. The author of Hebrews warned the early church, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” Over time, fellowship gave way to ritual and friendship to formality. Today, in countries where Christianity is accepted and has a long track record, fellowship is often weak. But where Christianity has recently been introduced or where Christians are persecuted – that’s where we see strong and regular fellowship take place. The practice of regular fellowship can be rediscovered. Many Christians are doing it today – in house churches, in intentional communities, in various ways, they’ve determined to make fellowship a vital part of their lives.

If we’re going to rediscover fellowship, we need to figure out why it’s important. If it’s just about a meal and a movie, if it’s just about playing games outside or cooking chili, it probably isn’t. But if there’s more, then we as disciples should learn it and practice it. What I see in Scripture is that fellowship is vital to a healthy and growing church.

Let's take a look at our passage from 1 John today to figure out why. The opening of 1 John tells us in a nutshell that Jesus, the Word of God, lived and dwelt among us, and that's who we proclaim and worship. John didn't proclaim a myth; he didn't preach about a fantasy. He taught about Jesus, the Son of the Father, who those living in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel saw and heard and witnessed with their own eyes. This is all real, John says; we experienced it.

There's a reason why John proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. He writes, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." The very point of what the disciples did, facing hardship and persecution and even death, was that we might have fellowship with one another and with God. By becoming a part of the fellowship of believers, we become part of God's very own fellowship. One of the earliest blessings in the church came from Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." We can experience fellowship with God right now through the Holy Spirit.

That's enormous. God wants us to be in fellowship with Him! When we look through descriptions of eternity, we see fellowship. We have a portrait of the wedding feast of the Lamb. Jesus describes the Kingdom of God like a ruler inviting His people to attend a great banquet. We have a picture of eternal life with God being a celebration. When we have special times to get together and enjoy God's goodness, we're getting a foretaste of God's Kingdom.

But there's even more to fellowship with God. There's intimacy. In Revelation, when God's people are resurrected, heaven meets earth at the new city of Jerusalem. God comes down to us and lives with us forever and ever. Jesus came not just to save us from our sins, but to show us that our untamed, wonderful, mysterious, sovereign God too big for us to ever know wanted to be relatable to us. Not just in some mystical, pie-in-the-sky way, but through flesh and blood, through Jesus, spending time with us in the literal world we perceive and understand.

God gave us each other as well, within the church, so we can experience the same thing. If the Holy Spirit lives inside of us and works to transform us into the likeness of Christ, then in fellowship, we are "Jesus with skin on" to one another. We are Jesus' representatives in the world, acting on His behalf, reminding one another that God loves us and calls us and offers us forgiveness when we turn to Him. But for us to experience God working in our midst, we must be in fellowship with one another on a regular basis.

If God gave Himself to us through Jesus Christ so that we could be in fellowship with one another and with Him, experiencing His love not just metaphorically but in a real way in our daily lives, then fellowship should be something we embrace. So if fellowship is so important, what are the key qualifications to being in fellowship?

We see them again in the second half of our passage from 1 John. Listen one more time... "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

True fellowship is about more than just getting together for fun or food or even Bible study or worship. The prerequisite for true Christian fellowship is walking in the light of God. If we walk in darkness, John says, any claim we make of fellowship with God is false. We might “hang out” with Christians, but we’re not genuinely in fellowship with them. But if we walk in the light, not only do we have fellowship with God, we have fellowship with one another. That’s why we can relate to true believers across continents and across denominations; we have fellowship through the Holy Spirit that binds us together.

The word “fellowship” really has two very different meanings. The first meaning of “fellowship” is superficial, little more than showing up and participating in activities. That’s what the world thinks of fellowship. But the meaning Scripture gives us in the Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, is far deeper. The fellowship that God wants us to have is rich and meaningful. It’s the kind of fellowship where there’s no debate between staying at home and watching the ball game or going to fellowship. Once you’re in genuine fellowship, it has an irresistible pull on you. You want more and more of it, just like when you truly realize God’s love for you, you feel drawn to study and worship Him.

But to experience that kind of fellowship, we’ve got to embrace the Holy Spirit’s movement in us, to live as new creations in the light of God’s love. If we believe that Jesus is willing to save us without changing us, if we think that we can have the benefits of faith without the cost of abandoning the sin we used to live in, we are being deceived. And while we may participate in the external fellowship of the church, we will never truly have the intimate fellowship that comes from being in a close relationship with God, which leads to meaningful, lasting friendships with other believers.

That’s why fellowship is far more than the occasional outing or fun event. True fellowship is about worship, about study, about outreach, about service, about living life together as brothers and sisters in the LORD. In the midst of that kind of fellowship, the bonds between all of us grow and our connections to God become like roots in an intertwined forest, where we all are on solid ground, firmly planted in Christ.

When those kind of networks are built, our faith becomes rock solid. When one of us is hurting or in need, we are right there to provide support. We encourage, we nurture, and we build upon the foundation that Jesus Christ has laid. Fellowship forges bridges across personal prejudices and different cultures; it shows us that in Jesus Christ, we are all unified. And perhaps that’s why we see the enemy taking such an interest in disrupting Christian fellowship.

In Paul’s letter to the Phillipians, we heard this morning about a dispute going on in the church. Paul wrote, “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.” These two women had steadfastly helped Paul; they were sincere believers that Paul said were saints saved for eternity. Yet Euodia and Syntyche were at war.

We don't know what these two were arguing about. But it's interesting that Paul's plea for them to get along in the LORD is found couched in a series of encouragements to stand firm, to rejoice in the LORD always, to let their gentleness be evident to all. For this appeal to be in the middle of Paul's exhortations tells me that their feud was damaging the fellowship and giving a negative witness to the community at large.

There are two sides to this. One is the most obvious: we're not always all going to get along. Even if everyone who was a part of fellowship was a believer in Jesus Christ – which usually isn't the case – we're still going to find other people frustrating and annoying at times. There are times when fellowship becomes more about who's sending the invitations and who's setting up the tables and who's in charge of the kitchen than it is about enjoying one another in the LORD. Sometimes, when two folks have different points of view on a subject, they attack one another rather than seriously searching the Scriptures for more guidance. All of us who've been a part of a faith community for very long have seen this. And Paul says, stop it! The community of faith is made for rejoicing, not bickering. If God is bringing us into His Kingdom and making us into a holy people, shouldn't we reflect that?

The flip side is this: when we have genuine fellowship, when outsiders see what God is up to, they will see Jesus Christ at work. When we love each other, when we gather together not because we have to but because we want to, when we get together outside of worship services and official events because we experience the love of God when we fellowship, that makes waves. That gets noticed. Because in our society, people rarely fellowship. We drive our cars into our garages, turn on the TV, and we tune the rest of the world out. But if we fellowship in Jesus Christ, through our events, through our study, through our outreach, we will stand out as light in the darkness. And some will see that light and want to live in it too.

So my encouragement to you today as Jesus' disciples is this: get involved in fellowship. Come to events, sure, but get engaged in our Bible study or one of our teams like worship or outreach. Invite one another into your homes. Don't settle for surface friendships with your brothers and sisters here. Get to know one another and fellowship in the LORD. God has designed fellowship to strengthen and encourage us.

I started this morning talking about a bunch of LA teens that, through their fellowship and study together, mastered calculus and made it into college. If that kind of fellowship can work wonders in school, how much more is God going to grow us through fellowship! In fellowship, He has given us a new family, one that will last for eternity. And being in fellowship with one another will help to keep us walking in the truth of Jesus Christ, the light that brightens our path and promises us a glorious future in Him. Determine to be a people of fellowship with one another and with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... and God will be in our midst as we come together in His name.