



TOPIC:

community

Christian

FOUNDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Christian FOUNDATIONS

Christian Foundations is a series of studies that helps people discover (and rediscover) the FOUNDATIONS of believing in, living life with and serving Jesus.

Each module is centred around the rhythm of daily self-study and reflection on Scripture and weekly discussion with a Christian mentor (or mentoring group).

The daily rhythm involves:

- A brief introduction to the Scripture reading
- The study of a Scripture passage
- Reflection and journaling on the passage
- A short devotion flowing from the passage
- A prayer to pray aloud
- An action to take in response to what you have learned

The modules can be completed in any number or order depending on your needs, but for someone completing all the modules a **suggested order** is:

1. Identity
2. Spirit
3. Growth
4. Service
5. Mission
6. Perseverance
7. Baptism
8. Community

INSTRUCTIONS

ORGANISE with a mentor or mentoring group when you will meet and which module you will do together each week.

STUDY daily one of the five Bible studies (Study 1-5), and write any reflections, questions and revelations. It will probably take you about 20 minutes to complete the reading and reflection. (If a daily study proves too difficult, you could decide to spread each module over two weeks.)

MEET weekly (or fortnightly) with your mentor (and other members if in a group). There is a guide for this discussion at the end of each module.

ADVICE

Decide in advance exactly where and when you will spend the time each day reading and reflecting on the Scripture passage and input. With a regular time and place, it is much more likely that you will get the studies done.

Make sure you don't "move on" from each module until you have spoken and debriefed with your mentor or mentoring group about this important foundation of Christian living. Be completely honest with your mentor. If you don't understand something, are having doubts, or forget to do the studies, just tell them. This isn't a test you can get wrong. It is an investment into the rest of your life with God.

Write down your questions and reflections and bring this to your weekly meeting. It would also help to have a look at the discussion questions before you meet with your mentor. Pray that God will use these studies to grow you and release you into a more grace-centred, God-focused and joy-filled life in Christ.

READING 1: A NEW COMMUNITY

orientate

Back in the old days when surprise bucks parties were the norm, there was one that I attended that really started off with great energy and bravado. We rushed into the guy's place, grabbed him, blindfolded him and bundled him into a car. We threatened all sorts of punishments. But unfortunately, we had not planned well. We had no idea what to do next. We then sat around for an hour looking sheepishly at each other. It was very embarrassing. That could easily have happened to the church after Pentecost. The Spirit had come. Lots of people had become Christians. It was very exciting, but now what? Jesus had left no clear instructions on what to do, especially with all the new followers. But these Christians didn't hang around looking sheepishly at each other. They quickly forged a new pattern of community as described in this reading.

explore

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.

journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. List the different activities of this brand new Christian community. Have you experienced community like this?

reflect

The new Christians quickly realised that they were in this together. That they weren't going to make it by themselves. They needed the teaching of the apostles. They wanted to pray together. They benefitted from spending time together. They could support each other in really practical ways. They quickly became one big family. Learning and growing and eating and sharing and praying and worshipping and seeing miracles together. This was Christian community at its best. Just the way God intended.

It's a pity it didn't last. Well not as happily as the form of community described here. A few chapters on in Acts we find it beginning to crumble at the edges, with the dishonesty and attention-seeking of a few of its members. There were testing times to come. But everywhere in the New Testament community is emphasised.

Just because our community does not quite live up to that first community, doesn't give us an excuse to follow Jesus by ourselves. Never! You were designed by God for community. You are called to be involved in community. You are at your best in community. You grow most naturally in community.

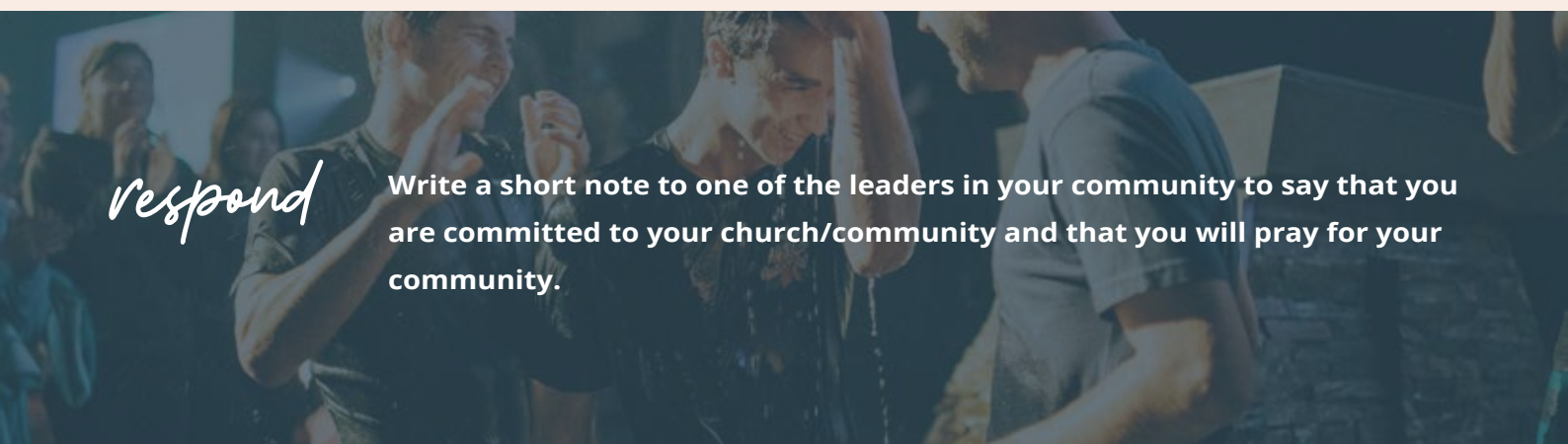
Maybe you will have the privilege to be part of a community as strong as the one in Acts 2. That's a special blessing from God. But whatever your experiences, God is calling you to community. You need a community of Christians (a church) where you can learn, love, pray, grow, share, serve and worship. Don't let Satan fool you into thinking that you'll be fine by yourself. You can't be and you won't be. If you have not committed to a community, then quickly do so. You need them and they need you.

pray

Thanks for my Christian community Lord. It's not perfect because there are lots of others like me, but you have given me a community in which my faith can be nurtured and I can grow. Please help me to play my part in helping my community be a place where everyone is welcome and real love is experienced. Keep growing us as we become more teachable, more honest, more loving and more sacrificial.

respond

Write a short note to one of the leaders in your community to say that you are committed to your church/community and that you will pray for your community.



READING 2: A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

orientate

One of the chief challenges and opportunities for community is diversity. If everyone in a community thinks the same way, has the same background, and values the same things, then community is relatively simple. Probably shallower, but certainly easier. However, if people are hugely different, then this poses great challenges and problems in building community. Spare a thought for the early church. Talk about a diverse community. In the one church there could be Jews and Gentiles (who had no respect for each other and very dissimilar values), slaves and free people (who had such differing status and experiences in life), men and women (who had distinctive roles in society) – all worshipping and sharing and eating together. Get your head around that. It would have been much easier to form separate sub-communities, but Paul wouldn't have a bar of that.

explore

1 Corinthians 12:12-20

12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. 15 Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say,

“Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. Why would God want us to build community with diverse people?

reflect

Judging from the letters that make up a lot of the New Testament, this issue of diversity in the community of Christians was probably the number one challenge for the early church. People were thrown together in the church that would just never mix in society. A pastor friend had a similar experience in planting a church in the city. He said that it brought together conservative doctors, entrepreneurial business owners, bohemian hairdressers and homeless vagrants. These people had so little in common. Well ramp that up a few notches and you have the early church. How on earth did it function, let alone become God's light and hope for the world?

Well first they recognised that what they had in common was far more significant than their differences. They were the one body. They were all connected with Christ. They all had God's Spirit in them. Jews and Gentiles. Slaves and free people. Men and women. There were no second-class citizens in this community. Their culture

screamed that this could not be true. But the church listened to God not culture. You will come across people in your community that see things very differently to you. Don't be surprised. That's the church. Keep looking past these differences to see that you have Jesus in common. They are your brothers and sisters. You are one body.

Second, they saw that this diversity was actually a good thing, a God thing. As Paul explains, you don't want your body parts to all look and function the same. That would be most unhelpful. Lots of eyes all over your body might help you see well but you would have no hearing or smell. Christians with different perspectives and values are not a threat or problem, they are a help. So embrace those who are different from you and listen and learn from them. Maybe you "see" well, but you need some help with "hearing." As our society splinters over politics and values and worldviews, the body of Christ displays unity and community.

pray

Lord not everyone sees things my way and this frustrates me at times. I usually prefer to be with people who think and behave like me. I feel safest with that group. But your body is far broader and richer than me and my ideas and behaviours, and I'm not going to grow well in my enclave. So challenge me and stretch me and push me out of my comfort zone so that I can grow and so that together our community will be richer and deeper and more Spirit-filled.

respond

Think of someone who is quite different from you. Write down one thing that you can learn from this person and thank God for them.

READING 3: A NEEDY COMMUNITY

orientate

I'm a fairly self-dependent person. I don't naturally rely on others nor do I enjoy being needed by others. I would be comfortable just doing my own thing and only working with or serving others when necessary. But thank goodness God has never allowed me to stay isolated. He has constantly called me to give myself to others in my community both as a servant and a leader. And he has continually raised up people who help me serve God and do the things with me and around me that I could never do myself. My life and ministry has been hugely enriched by being part of a community where we meet each other's needs.

explore

1 Corinthians 12:21-31

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. Who would be the weaker but indispensable parts (12:22-25) in your community?

reflect

The main point Paul is making in this passage is that you need your whole Christian community. Yes there are some people that may seem to be less gifted or more needy or more challenging. They may appear to have less to offer you. But they're actually the ones that require special attention and concern because they are so important to the health of the whole community. You need everyone whether you realise it or not. You will never be spiritually healthy without your community.

But not only do you need them, they need you too. Everyone has some gift to offer the community. No-one can do it all. Without your contribution, your community will be missing something. You may feel inadequate or unimportant, but this is not true. If you feel less "honourable," maybe you're one of the special ones Paul is writing about? At the very least, you can share the suffering and rejoicing of those in your community.

Yes, we're all needy. We certainly need God, but we need each other as well. I get very frustrated when people tell me that they're not involved in church anymore but they're still following Jesus. How can anyone follow Jesus and ignore his body? What about all the needs they have that their church community is supposed to be filling? What about all the needs the church has that they're supposed to be filling? Community is essential.

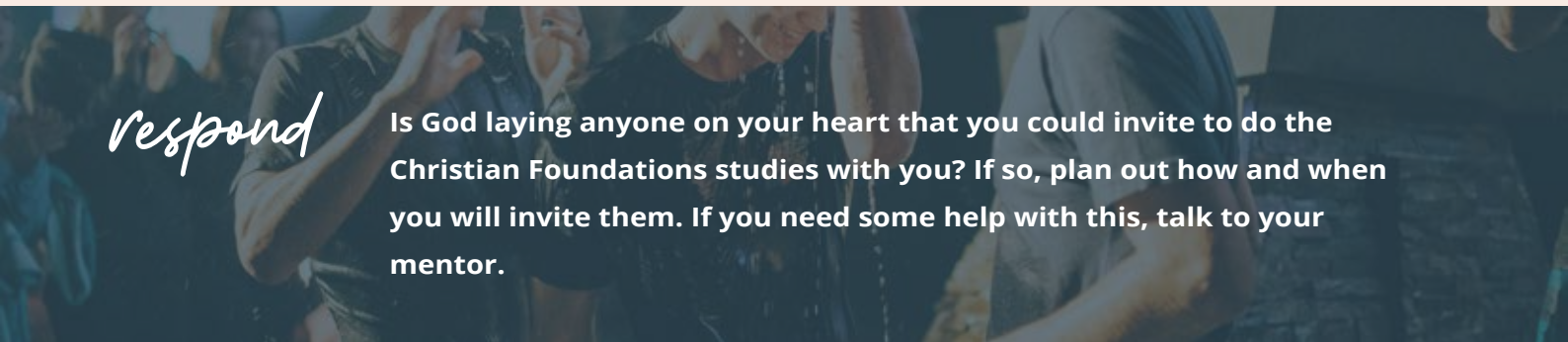
If you're wondering how you could contribute to your church community at the moment, maybe you could ask your mentor. You could serve in some formal church ministry or you could contribute informally through encouraging or supporting or praying with others. Maybe you could now take someone else through this Christian Foundations course? Why not?

pray

Thanks for the community that you have placed me in Lord. I need these people. All of them. Even the ones who seem to be more challenging. Help me to learn from others and to serve others. Bind us together so that people will recognise that we are your body Jesus.

respond

Is God laying anyone on your heart that you could invite to do the Christian Foundations studies with you? If so, plan out how and when you will invite them. If you need some help with this, talk to your mentor.



READING 4: A LOVING COMMUNITY

orientate

In this study we have been stressing the importance of community. But real community is not easy. As we have seen, there will be people that see things differently. There will be difficult or demanding people. Resentment and bitterness and anger and criticism can grow in community. Community can be a hotspot of gossip and unforgiveness. Community can be a source of pain and problems. There are some communities that do more damage than good. So how is this to be avoided? How do we develop healthy community? It basically comes down to love. Can we love each other? That's what Paul explains here.

explore

Ephesians 4:29-5:2

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. 1 Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children 2 and walk

in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. How can we "grieve the Holy Spirit" (4:30)? What does this mean?

reflect

There are some people we find it easier to love. They feel safe. They share our passions. We like to be around them. We get on well with them. We trust them. These are our friends. Everyone needs friends. People with whom we can let down our guard and just be ourselves. Relationships with friends are renewing and refreshing and mostly enjoyable. We need to have some friends in our community. We don't flaunt our relationships with our friends or others will feel excluded. But we do appreciate and value them. Friends are really important for us.

But building community with others who are not our close friends is often going to be challenging, especially if we hold grudges or get angry easily, or tend to criticise, or find it difficult to let things go. When you spend time with people there are many opportunities for perceived slights or unkind (and probably untrue) perceptions. God says that you just have to let it all go and be gracious. Get up on the altar and sacrifice yourself again. That's what Jesus did. People treated him cruelly and he responded by

giving his life for them. This means dropping your bitterness and crudeness and anger and criticism and instead being forgiving, kind and compassionate. It is a deliberate choice you have to make.

If you think that's too hard for you, in this passage Paul suggests three ways forward:

1. Remember they are Christian brothers and sisters and being critical or treating them poorly breaks the Spirit's heart.
2. Focus on how Christ has forgiven and continues to forgive you despite your failure.
3. Contemplate the example of Jesus who showed us how to really love everyone.

As we grow in love, our community/church is strengthened, God is really pleased, and we together grow more like Jesus. Through this, the wider community sees the powerful transformation that Jesus makes in our lives and takes notice of Jesus. As Jesus himself said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

pray

Lord thanks for loving me so deeply. You gave your life for me, forgave me completely and included me in your community. Please help me to love others in the same way. Please give me strength to forgive and be kind and compassionate. Thanks for those in my life for whom my love comes easily, but I want to love everyone, and I really need your help for that.

respond

There will probably be someone in your community that you find more difficult to love. Forgive them if they have hurt you and, if possible, say aloud to yourself that you love them. Try to sense God's love for them.

READING 5: A COMMITTED COMMUNITY

orientate

I don't know if you have a favourite verse in the Bible, but mine is in today's reading - Ephesians 4:16 *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* I am not really sure why it's my favourite but I love the way it describes how the church functions at its best. I've been a pastor for most of my life and I've seen the church look like this on occasions - Christ as head, the whole body committed, the support structures working well (including the leaders) and everyone playing their part. It is very exciting and powerful. This is how God intends the church to be. This is the way we together reach maturity as a community.

explore

Ephesians 4:11-16

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their

deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. Do you think this passage describes your church? Why or why not?

reflect

There are a number of requirements for a church like this. The leaders need to be equipping members of the community, so they are growing in understanding, ministry and mission (4:11-13). The people need to be lovingly honest with themselves and with others (4:15). Everyone needs to be submitting to Christ as the head (4:15). And each person needs to be playing their part (4:16).

The word that encapsulates all of this is **commitment**. The leaders are committed to Christ and their people. They want to help them attain to “the whole measure of the fulness of Christ” (4:13) and are pouring into them all they have learned. The people are committed to Christ and each other. They are not standing on the sidelines watching on but are putting their love into action through honest community and hard work. Everyone is committed to Christ, the community, and the mission.

My wife often says, “Criticism is the luxury of the uninvolved.” Your church doesn’t need more critics. It needs more people who submit to Jesus and throw themselves into the life of the community and its mission – learning, loving, serving, growing. This doesn’t mean that church activities need to fill all of your life. But if you’re going to be part of a vibrant, growing church then you need to commit.

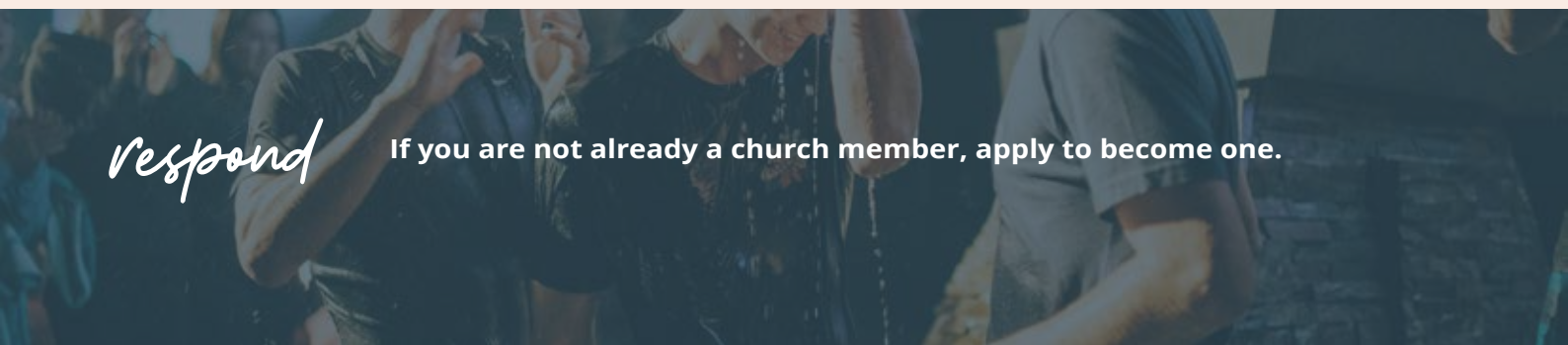
In most churches this involves becoming a member. The members are the followers of Jesus who support the church and its leadership, who are committed to being involved, and who together help make the decisions that govern the future of the church. Membership is the way you show your commitment to the church community. If you want to know more about church membership, talk to your mentor.

pray

Lord you have great plans for your church and I don’t want to miss out on anything that you are doing. Through my church, teach me, equip me, challenge me, encourage me and mature me. In sporting terminology, I want to be one of the players on the field and not one of the watchers in the stands. May I play my part with strong commitment.

respond

If you are not already a church member, apply to become one.



Discussion QUESTIONS

Use these questions to discuss with a mentor or group what God has shown you in this study

Study 1: A New Community (Acts 2:42-47)

1. Any reflections or questions on Study 1? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
2. List the different activities of this brand new Christian community. Have you experienced community like this?

Study 2: A Diverse Community (1 Corinthians 12:12-20)

3. Any reflections or questions on Study 2? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
4. Why would God want us to build community with diverse people?

Study 3 A Needy Community (1 Corinthians 12:21-31)

5. Any reflections or questions on Study 3? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
6. Who would be the weaker but indispensable parts (12:22-25) in your community?

Study 4: A Loving Community (Ephesians 4:29-5:2)

7. Any reflections or questions on Study 4? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
8. How can we "grieve the Holy Spirit" (4:30)? What does this mean?

Study 5: A Committed Community (Ephesians 4:11-16)

9. Any reflections or questions on Study 5? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
10. Do you think this passage describes your church? Why or why not?

11. What is Christian community supposed to look like? What contribution can you make to a community like this? Talk about the possibility of church membership.

12. How are you going spiritually and personally? What other things would you like to talk about?

