



Acts: Build Community
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New Community

BIBLE STUDY SERIES

God has created us for community. This need is built into the very fiber of our being, the DNA of our spirit. As Christians, our deepest desire is to see the truth of God's Word as it influences our relationship with others. We long for a dynamic encounter with God's Word, intimate closeness with His people, and radical transformation of our lives. But how can we accomplish those three difficult tasks?

The New Community Bible Study Series creates a place for all of this to happen. In-depth Bible study, community-building opportunities, and life-changing applications are all built into every session of this small group study series.

How to Build Community

How do we build a strong, healthy Christian community? The whole concept for this study grows out of a fundamental understanding of Christian community that is dynamic and transformational. We believe that Christians don't simply gather to exchange doctrinal affirmations. Rather, believers are called by God to get into each other's lives. We are family, for better or for worse, and we need to connect with each other.

Community is not built through sitting in the same building and singing the same songs. It is forged in the fires of life. When we know each other deeply—the good, the bad, and the ugly—community is experienced. Community grows when we learn to rejoice with one another, celebrating life. Roots grow deep when we know we are loved by others and are free to extend love to them as well. Finally, community deepens and is built when we commit to serve each other and let others serve us. This process of doing ministry and humbly receiving the ministry of others is critical for healthy community life.

Build Community Through Knowing and Being Known


We all long to know others deeply and to be fully known by them. Although we might run from this level of intimacy at times, we all want to have people in our lives who trust us enough to disclose the deep and tender parts of themselves. In turn, we want to reveal some of our feelings, expressing them freely to people we trust.

The first section of each of these six sessions creates a place for deep knowing and being known. Through serious reflection on the truth of Scripture, you will be invited to communicate parts of your heart and life with your small group members. You might even discover yourself opening parts of your heart that you have normally kept hidden. The Bible study and discussion questions do not encourage surface conversation. The only way to go deep in knowing others and being known by them is to dig deep, and this takes some work. Knowing others also takes trust—that you will honor each other and respect each other's confidences.

Build Community Through Celebrating and Being Celebrated

If you have not had a good blush recently, read a short book in the Bible called Song of Songs. It's a record of a bride and groom writing poetic and romantic love letters to each other. They are freely celebrating every conceivable aspect of each other's personality, character, and physical appearance. At one point the groom says, "You have made my heart beat fast with a single glance from your eyes." Song of Songs is a reckless celebration of life, love, and all that is good.

We need to recapture the joy and freedom of celebration. In each session your group will commit to celebrate together. Although there are many ways to express joy, we will let our expression of celebration come through prayer. In each session you will take time to come before the God of joy and celebrate who He is and what He is doing. You will also have opportunity to celebrate what God is doing in your life and the lives of those who are a part of your small group. You will become a community of affirmation, celebration, and joy through your prayer time together.



You will need to be sensitive during this time of prayer together. Not everyone feels comfortable praying with a group of people. Be aware that each person is starting at a different place in their freedom to pray in a group, and be patient. Seek to promote a warm and welcoming atmosphere where each person can stretch a little and learn what it means to be a community that celebrates with God in the center.

Build Community Through Loving and Being Loved

Unless we are exchanging deeply committed levels of love with a few people, we will die slowly on the inside. This is precisely why so many people feel almost nothing at all. If we don't learn to exchange love with family and friends, we will eventually grow numb and no longer believe love is even a possibility. This is not God's plan. He hungers for us to be loved and to give love to others. As a matter of fact, He wants this for us even more than we want it for ourselves.

Every session in this study will address the area of loving and being loved. You will be challenged, in your personal life and as a small group, to be intentional and consistent about building love relationships. You will get practical tools and be encouraged to set measurable goals for giving and receiving love.

Build Community Through Serving and Being Served

Community is about serving and humbly allowing others to serve you. The single most stirring example of this is recorded in John 13, where Jesus takes the position of the lowest servant and washes the feet of His followers. He gives them a powerful example and then calls them to follow. Servanthood is at the very core of community. To sustain deep relationships over a long period of time, there must be humility and a willingness to serve each other.

At the close of each session will be a clear challenge to servanthood. As a group, and as individual followers of Christ, you will discover that community is built through serving others. You will also find that your own small group members will grow in their ability to extend service to your life.

Bible Study Basics


To get the most out of this study, you will need to prepare and participate. Here are some guidelines to help you.

Preparing for the Study

1. If possible, even if you are not the leader, look over each lesson before you meet, read the Bible passages, and answer the questions. The more you are prepared, the more you will gain from the study.
2. Begin your preparation time with prayer. Ask God to help you understand the passage and apply it to your life.
3. A good modern translation, such as the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible, or the New Revised Standard Version, will give you the most help. Questions in this guide are based on the New International Version.
4. Read and reread the passages. You must know what the passage says before you can understand what it means and how it applies to you.
5. Write your answers in the spaces provided in the study guide. This will help you to participate more fully in the discussion and will also help you personalize what you are learning.
6. Keep a Bible dictionary handy to look up unfamiliar words, names, or places.

Participating in the Study

1. Be willing to join in the discussion. The leader of the group will not be lecturing but will encourage people to discuss what they have learned in the passage. Plan to share what God has taught you during your preparation time.
2. Stick to the passages being studied. Base your answers on the verses being discussed rather than on outside authorities such as commentaries or your favorite author or speaker.

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3. Try to be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they speak, and be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage more hesitant members of the group to participate.
 4. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. By all means participate, but allow others to have equal time.
 5. If you are a discussion leader or a participant who wants further insights, you will find additional comments in the Leader's Notes at the back of this book.

Acts – Build Community

Welcome to the Adventure

As we grow in our responsiveness to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we give birth to community. As we experience authentic community, worship erupts. As we grow into deep worshipers of Jesus Christ, our mission becomes crystal clear.

People matter to God, and they matter to us when we have the heart of Christ. The story of Acts helps us see that a group of Christ followers, ignited by the presence of the Spirit, truly can change the world. Church is no longer a place we go or something we do; we *are* the church.

Do you hunger for a new and fresh experience of the Holy Spirit? Does your soul thirst for real, authentic community? Do you long to grow as a worshiper of the living God? Are you filled with a longing to invite others into the community of Christ followers called the church? If so, welcome to this adventure called the book of Acts. Let's build community together.

What Might Happen?

What might happen in our lives if we are committed to let the message and power of the book of Acts come alive? If we are willing to enter this study with an open heart, we will connect with the most prominent character in the book of Acts—the central figure in this history of the early church.

Take a moment to read a few of the opening verses of the book of Acts:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

(Acts 1:1–2)

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 1:4–5)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

(Acts 1:8)

Who is the most prominent character in the book of Acts? It is not Peter, and it is not the apostle Paul—although both play significant roles. The lead role in the drama of the book of Acts is played by the Holy Spirit. (Some scholars even call this book “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.”) The early church experienced the prominent and powerful presence of the Holy Spirit working among them. Ordinary people were gifted and empowered to do extraordinary things; but apart from the Spirit, they could do nothing. The Spirit is *the* source of power for kingdom living. If you desire to be fully open to the Holy Spirit and receive supernatural power to live a kingdom life, the book of Acts is for you.

As we look at the early church through the window of this book, we will learn to practice community in new and fresh ways. The Holy Spirit gives birth to the community of the church. You will discover that the meaning of community is not vague or hazy. Luke, the author of Acts, does not allow us to understand community as a general feeling of goodwill toward people with a few peripheral behaviors. Rather, Luke places community at the core of our being. Community is about how we belong to each other as Christ followers.

Reflect on a few verses that paint a picture of what the Spirit was doing among the early followers of Christ:

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

(Acts 1:14)

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

(Acts 2:1)

All the believers were together and had everything in common.

(Acts 2:44)

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.


(Acts 5:12)

History shows that when God moves in mighty ways, the people of God face life together. They don't just go to church—they meet together, pray together, share what they have, and invest deeply in each other's lives of each other. Explosive energy is generated when God's people are together. Worship and praise erupts and can't be stopped!

The Longing of Our Hearts

The book of Acts paints a vivid picture of life infused with the dynamic and radiant power of the Holy Spirit. This book gives us a look behind the curtain of the delivery room where the church was given birth. We see the first breath of the Holy Spirit filling this small band of believers. We watch as the church takes its first steps toward discovering how to live as God's new community. As we watch this drama unfold, we discover we are not watching *their* story, but *our* story. We are the church of Jesus Christ—still growing, still maturing, still learning, still discovering what God would have us be.

We are created for community. We long to be with other Christ followers, to know and be known, love and be loved,



serve and be served, celebrate and be celebrated. Our place in the life of the community of God's people becomes clear as the book of Acts helps us build community. Our yearning to know the purpose of our existence is satisfied as the pathway to intimacy with God and others unveils itself through the drama of the early church.

—John Ortberg


Filled with the Spirit

ACTS 1:1–11

Frank Laubach, a pastor who had served in the Philippines as a missionary in the early part of the twentieth century, hit bottom. As he looked at his life's work, it seemed like it had all come to nothing. He and his wife had lost three children to malaria; and now, in his mid-forties, he was separated for health reasons from his wife and their one remaining child. Frank Laubach felt isolated and broken. But then . . . he met God! He found relief when he discovered that he could live in intimate communion with God through the Holy Spirit.

During this process of seeking peace, he maintained a personal journal of prayers and reflections. He wrote these words sitting on a mountain, facing a life of failure, separated from everyone he loved:

The most wonderful discovery that has ever come to me is that I do not have to wait until some future time until the glorious hour. I do not need to . . . wait for any grave. This hour can be heaven. Any hour for anybody can be as rich as God. For do you not see that God is trying experiments with human lives. That's why there are so many of them. He has, at this moment, one billion seven hundred million experiments going on around the world. And His question is, "How far will this man and that woman allow me to carry this hour?" This Sunday afternoon at three o'clock He was asking it of us all. I do not know what the rest of you said, but as for me, I asked God, "How wonderful do you wish this hour alone with me to be?" And God answered convincingly, "It can be as wonderful as any hour that any



human being has ever lived. For I who pushed life up through the protozoa and the tiny grass and the fish and the bird and the dog and the gorilla and the human being and who am reaching out toward eternity, I have not become satisfied yet. I am not only willing to make this hour marvelous, I am in travail to set you akindle with the Christ-thing that has no name. How fully can you surrender and not be afraid?" And I answered, "Fill my mind with your mind to the last crevice. Catch me up in your arms, God, and make this hour as terribly glorious as any human being ever lived, if you will. I scarce see how one could live if his heart held more than mine has held from Thee these past few hours."

Clearly my job here is not to go to the town plaza and convince people to change their religious beliefs or to win a theological debate. My job is to live wrapped in God, trembling to His thoughts, burning with His passion. And my loved ones, that is the best gift you can give to the place where you live. . . . You and I shall soon blow away from our bodies. Money, praise, poverty, opposition, these make no difference, for they will all alike be forgotten in a thousand years. But this Spirit, which comes to a mind set upon continuous surrender—this Spirit is timeless life.

Frank Laubach's life stands as a testament to the Holy Spirit's power to move through the life of a willing person. This broken and yielded man decided that his one passion would be to walk in the presence of His God, led by the Spirit, every moment of every day. What grew out of this decision, he allowed, would be up to God.

What did God do through this man? Frank Laubach developed a volunteer-based method of literacy education known as "each one teach one" and became the father of a worldwide literacy movement. As a result of his teaching methods, more than sixty million people speaking two hundred different languages and dialects learned to read in their own native tongue. He became an advisor to presidents and national leaders.

What can God do through one life fully surrendered to the leading of the Holy Spirit? Only God can answer that question. Do you dare ask Him?

Making the Connection

1. What does it look like when the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of a person or church?

Describe a time when you had a deep sense of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Knowing and Being Known

The Hard Work of Waiting

My childhood church expected everybody to attend the main service—even little kids. We had no children’s church, no developmentally appropriate age-sensitive curriculum, no special message for kids. From the time we were old enough to graduate from nursery, we were old enough for big church. We had none of this contemporary, seeker-friendly jazz. No dramas or stirring visuals enhanced our worship. No

Generation X, guitar-playing, surfer dude led worship to make it exciting, entertaining, or relevant. We did church the good ol' fashioned way, with hymns accompanied by the organ and sermons that seemed eternal. And we liked it that way! . . . Well, not really.

I made it through by snacking from a little plastic bag of Cheerios that my mom brought for me. I would ration them and eat them as slowly as I could. If the message finished before my Cheerios ran out, I considered the morning good. But if the Cheerios ran out before the message was over, I knew it would be a long morning for all of us. To this day, if a sermon or message goes particularly long, I find myself having a strange craving for Cheerios.

Read Acts 1:1–5 and Luke 1:1–4

2. Describe a time when you had to wait for something that you were very excited to receive or experience.

How did you feel when the waiting was finally over?

Why is waiting so hard for us?