

HOLYHABITS

FELLOWSHIP



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BIBLE REFLECTIONS

40 READINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Edited by Andrew Roberts

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Introduction to Holy Habits

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47 (NRSV)

Holy Habits is a way of forming disciples that is emerging anew from an exploration of this precious portion of scripture, Luke's famous portrait of the early church. As such, it is both deeply biblical and an approach that lives when infused with the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit – the same Holy Spirit who brought life, energy and creativity to the first Christian communities.

Holy Habits is based upon a series of ten practices that are shown to be fruitful in the Acts 2 passage: biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, sharing resources, serving, eating together, gladness and generosity, worship, and making more disciples. In this series of material, passages relating to the ten habits are explored one habit at a time, sometimes with reference to other habits. In real life, the habits all get mixed up and



complement each other as part of a holistic way of discipleship. You may want to be alert to such connections.

There are many lists in the Bible, and with biblical lists the first and last items often have particular significance. In this list, it is significant that biblical teaching comes first. All of the habits are to be found throughout scripture, and healthy holy habits will be grounded in regular engagement with biblical teaching. This is a foundational habit.

The last habit is also significant. Commentators have remarked that it is no surprise that ‘day by day the Lord added to their number’ when life was lived in the way Luke describes. Many can be nervous of the word ‘evangelism’. Holy Habits offers a way of being evangelistic that may help to assuage some of those nerves.

Holy Habits is a way of life for followers of Jesus individually and collectively. In Acts 2:42–47, Luke offers clues as to how these practices can be fruitful. Note the devotion he mentions at the beginning and the repeated use of the word ‘all’. Holy Habits is a way of life for all ages (including children), cultures and contexts. The habits are to be lived day by day, in the whole of life, Monday to Saturday as well as Sunday. And note how Luke attributes the growth that results to the Lord. These are *holy* habits, which flourish when the Lord is at the centre of all.



Introduction to Fellowship

The Greek word translated as ‘fellowship’ in Acts 2 is *koinonia*. It is a word rich in depth, meaning and challenge. It points to a quality of relationship and activity which is much, much deeper than the chit-chat over a tepid cup of tea that is sadly often described as fellowship after many a Sunday service.

Koinonia is profoundly practical and deeply relational. John Stott argues that this *koinonia* ‘is a Trinitarian experience, it is our common share in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It also expresses what disciples of Jesus share together, what we give as well as what we receive’ (*The Message of Acts*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1990). C.K. Barrett suggests that the fellowship was ‘based upon common acceptance of the apostolic message [and] came into action in charitable use of its material resources’ (*Acts 1–14*, T&T Clark, 2004). David Watson points out that ‘*koinonia* in the New Testament occurs more frequently in the context of the sharing of money or possessions than in any other’ (*Discipleship*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981). So true fellowship is both deeply spiritual and profoundly practical.

The *koinonia* in Acts 2 is seen in followers of Jesus eating, praying and sharing resources together. In short, sharing their lives with each other and the world around them, in a prophetic symbol of the kingdom of God; a powerful sign of a Spirit-filled way of life that stands against the sinfulness of selfishness; a wonder of hope, reconciliation and generosity; and a true community of belonging and service.

As such, this is a habit that not just the church but also a frighteningly broken and fractious world urgently needs to rediscover and experience. Most of the reflections in this booklet focus on the practice of fellowship within the church. This is a good place to start, but in your thinking allow the Spirit to help you imagine how the principles you learn about and practise within the



Christian community can be lived within the wider world too. What might your office or staff room or community centre look and feel like if it too embraced the way of life Luke describes in Acts 2:42–47? How might our political debates be conducted in a more wholesome (holy) way if the principles of sharing we see in the passages studied guided these debates? And how might our economies be ordered?

In recent years, there has been a healthy and timely rediscovery of the importance of community within movements such as Fresh Expressions and New Monasticism. Timely because, in a world that in some ways is more connected than ever, more people than ever are lonely. This epidemic of loneliness has been growing for many years. As you reflect on this precious holy habit of *koinonia*, think and pray how it can be a gift you can share with a lonely neighbour, the shy person at work or a person at the bus stop on a rainy day.



| Nigel Wright

Welcoming the Lord

Genesis 18:1-5

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way – now that you have come to your servant.' 'Very well,' they answered, 'do as you say.'

(NIV)



Reflection

As Abraham is the one with whom the story of the people of God begins, the things that happened to him are bound to be formative for us. Already, God has spoken to Abraham in a vision that disclosed God's purpose for him. Now God comes again to draw Abraham into fellowship with God's own self, and he responds with hospitality centred around eating together.

Truth to tell, this is a mysterious event, but the opening verse makes it clear that it is a manifestation and act of God. The fact that in the wider narrative God is variously identified as the 'Lord', 'three men' and 'angels' is a puzzle, one in which some have traced an early anticipation of the divine Trinity. What is clear is that here God takes form in order to be present to Abraham, just as in later passages God appears in a variety of ways and supremely is made incarnate in Jesus the Son of God and Messiah. Hospitality was, and is, a sacred practice in the east, and by his unambiguous welcome Abraham reveals his own openness to God.

The God who took definitive form for us in Christ continues to invite our welcoming acceptance of God's presence through fellowship with the people of God, in the Spirit and in the spirit of Abraham. This is not an optional feature, but an essential dimension of the Christian life.

Reflect upon your main sources of Christian fellowship,
and be grateful.



Sharing the load

Exodus 18:17–23 (abridged)

Moses' father-in-law replied, 'What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out... You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people... and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them serve as judges for the people... That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.'

(NIV)



Reflection

This passage is among the various ‘firsts’ that we find recorded in the Bible. It is the first example of delegation, and as such it is often mentioned in leadership courses. When the work becomes overwhelming, it becomes necessary to share it, to let others come alongside to carry the burden of guiding the people or parcelling out responsibilities. This is a necessary aspect of fellowship, the showing of mutual care by carrying burdens together.

It could be objected that if followed precisely, Jethro’s advice would leave us with a model of church that is like a pyramid, with relationships extending from on high to below, a ‘command’ structure. It might further be considered that in the Christian community, relationships are preferable when they are mutual, sharing responsibilities between each other horizontally rather than vertically and for a shared aim. But the essential insight remains the same: in the mission of God there is too much work for any one of us to do. If it is to be done, it must involve all of us. The extent to which it does is the measure of how much might be achieved for God’s kingdom.

Fellowship is more than enjoying each other’s company. It involves common ownership of work that is to be done. In common endeavour, there can be huge, productive and joyful satisfaction.

Think about the term ‘the common good’ and how you contribute to it. Could you contribute more or, like Moses, do you need to do less for a while?



Covenant commitment

Ruth 1:14–17 (abridged)

Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. ‘Look,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.’ But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.’

(NIV)



Reflection

Belonging to God's people means being part of a covenant community. From our beginnings with Abraham, we have understood ourselves to be in a covenant, a committed and bonded relationship, with the God who has chosen us for a saving purpose. God has promised to be our God and that we will be God's own people. To be sure, this can be understood in a wrong way, as an assertion of superiority over others. Rightly viewed, it makes us servants of God's purposes, and so of the world.

Being in covenant with God carries with it the clear implication that we are also in a covenant relationship with each other, indeed with all who are counted as part of the fellowship of believers. We are bonded to each other and for God's sake are responsible for maintaining this bond of peace between us. Ruth was a Moabite rather than an Israelite, but she has the honour of a biblical book named after her, precisely because of the words we read here. She joined herself in faithfulness and loyalty to her mother-in-law, so embracing the God of Israel without reservation. In so doing, she earned a future and a hope and everlasting renown in the eyes of Israel.

The church is a covenant community. It is more than a convenience, a kind of service station on the motorway of life. It is a family, a community that shapes our identity, a divine initiative at the centre of God's purpose. It invites us to give it the kind of indissoluble commitment shown us by Ruth.

How do you express covenant commitment in your local church and the universal church?



Reconstruction

Ezra 3:1-2, 5-6

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice the burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God... They presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the Lord, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the Lord. On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid. (NIV)



Reflection

After years spent in exile in Babylon, the leaders of Israel and many others returned to Jerusalem and began to re-establish the shared life of the people of God. Note where they began and the principles they followed. At the heart of this spiritual renewal were the words of Moses as described in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Guided by this biblical teaching, they began once more to offer sacrifices to the Lord, both those prescribed for the rhythms of the temple and the personal, freewill offerings brought by individuals as part of their own devotional lives. This worship was continuous, costly and habitual. It demonstrated the priorities that governed their lives: God was to be honoured in their midst even before a stone of the restored temple had been laid. After all, the worship of Israel's God was what the temple was all about.

God's people have often needed to be reformed and renewed; the need exists still every day. At the heart of any renewing work, the same elements are to be found: the living out of biblical teaching and the sincere intention to put God first, to sanctify God's name through prayer and worship in the midst of the people. Our fellowship together is not mere human companionship, but is shot through with divine presence and with spiritual vitality.

What do you see to be in need of renewal or reconstruction in the church or in the world? Call upon the name of the Lord so that God will be put first.



Perseverance

Nehemiah 2:17–20 (abridged)

Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.’ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. ‘What is this you are doing?’ they asked. ‘Are you rebelling against the king?’ I answered them by saying, ‘The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding.’

(NIV)



Reflection

It may be a spiritual law that anything worth attempting for God will encounter difficulties. Persistence and perseverance are supreme and necessary virtues. Fortunately, Nehemiah possessed these in abundance as he was divinely commissioned to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The three opponents mentioned almost have the character of pantomime villains. The ridicule and mocking they employed (accompanied by their misrepresentations, betrayals and malicious letter-writing) sowed the seeds of the later hostility between Jews and Samaritans. But Nehemiah was not to be overcome.

When confronted by similar circumstances, where do we find reserves of resolve and energy? In the God of heaven, of course. But the reference here to God's servants is also significant. To have those around us who will strengthen our hand in God, who will literally embody God's support of us by their presence, is invaluable. Happy are we if we have such persons alongside us.

Like Ezra, Nehemiah was about the work of renewing the people of God and rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, where God had chosen to dwell. It was costly, demanding work, requiring outstanding qualities of leadership and endurance. It was also a work that involved motivating and mobilising a dispirited and discouraged population. Such struggles are not unknown in today's churches, in which we often feel that we are victims of 'multiple overwhelms' in a changing and problematic culture. We need our Nehemiahs. Even more, we need each other.

Whose hands do you need to strengthen in God? Who can strengthen yours? Thank God for those who do.

HOLYHABITS is an adventure in Christian discipleship. Inspired by Luke's model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, it identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them.

These Bible reading notes have been created to help churches and individuals explore the habits through prayerful engagement with the Bible and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.



Whole-church resource book and group study material also available

- Provides eight weeks of Bible reading notes excluding weekends
- Takes a biblical and devotional look at each Holy Habit
- Encourages a habit of regular Bible reading

Praise for **HOLYHABITS**:

'A great tool that just gets better with use.'

Olive Fleming-Drane and John Drane

BIBLICAL TEACHING
FELLOWSHIP
 BREAKING BREAD
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 SERVING
 EATING TOGETHER
 GLADNESS AND GENEROSITY
 WORSHIP
 MAKING MORE DISCIPLES

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