

Aim of lesson

To help the young people to appreciate the basis of the fellowship that believers share with the Almighty God, with the Lord Jesus and with each other, and to understand how that fellowship should show itself in practice.

Bible background

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 1 John 1:3,6; Philemon 1:5-7; Romans 15:26-27
1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:10-14; 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:5, 11-13; 1 Timothy 1:19,20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18

Preparation required

How you present this lesson will vary considerably depending on the spiritual maturity of the young people in your group. If they appear to be a long way from a decision to be baptised, it may be best to leave the topic until later. Some may be baptised already, in which case it will be directly relevant. For those who are wavering, it can be a valuable opportunity to consider an important aspect of discipleship.

Suggested outline of lesson

Fellowship means sharing

Ask the young people what fellowship is. Get them to read Acts 2:42-47, and bring out the things that the members of the early church shared. Try to bring out the different aspects of their fellowship:

- Practical sharing and friendship: they shared possessions (v44), and each others' homes (v46).
- A common faith: they shared their beliefs, (v44) and opinions - they were of one mind, (v46).
- Fellowship with the Lord Jesus and with God: They worshipped together (v42, 47).

Although this was the pinnacle of the fellowship of the early church, the same elements are found throughout the New Testament.

Emphasise that fellowship is not something you are in or out of, it is something you do. It's not like belonging to an organisation - a swimming club, or chess club, say - it's like swimming or playing chess. In ecclesial life, fellowship is not (just)

having your name on the address roll; it is an active relationship with God, the Lord Jesus, and your brothers and sisters.

The expression 'in fellowship' or 'out of' it, never occurs in scripture.

Fellowship with the Lord Jesus and with God

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 is a reminder that our fellowship is a sharing in Christ, and that the breaking of bread is a visible symbol of that.

1 John 1:3,6 emphasises this point, and adds to it the point that it is fellowship with God that comes first. Remind the young people that the word 'Christadelphian' means 'brothers in Christ'

How should members of an ecclesia show this sort of fellowship today?

The early churches met together to observe the Lord's commandment, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. It seems very soon to have become the custom to do this on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). They ate bread and drank wine which was a corporate act of fellowship. They were told 'drink ye all of it' (you may need to explain that this was not a command to empty the cup). As the wine was shared by all, the blood was shed for all.

Our combined worship, especially in the singing of hymns and prayers, are special opportunities for us to show the wonder of the hope that we share.

A common faith

The members of the early church all believed the same things (Philemon 1:5-7). See how in this passage the ideas of preaching the word and a shared belief come together.

How should members of an ecclesia show this sort of fellowship today?

This comes about by sharing in teaching. So Sunday evenings where the gospel is preached are not a waste of time simply because nobody has walked in off the street - they can be valuable opportunities to reinforce the gospel message and our understanding of it.

It is important to have an opportunity for members of the ecclesia to discuss the word of God together. In this way we can raise, and get help with, doubts and questions, and we can learn from each other.

There is an individual and collective responsibility to ensure that our beliefs and actions are always based on an honest and prayerful consideration of scripture.

Practical sharing and friendship

The churches in Greece and Rome were collecting money to send to Jerusalem, where the members of the church were poor.

Romans 15:26-27: the words 'contribution' and 'share' (NIV) or 'partake' (AV) are both translations of the Greek word for fellowship (koinonia).

How should members of an ecclesia show this sort of fellowship today?

We should give practical help when there is need, not just words or advice (James 2:15-16). This could involve visiting someone who is ill, giving someone a lift to the meeting or to the doctors; doing the shopping for somebody who can't get out. Although for the most part we do not suffer the same hardships as in the first century, we should also be ready to help each other out financially. This sharing extends to all our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Just as the church in Rome were taught to give money for their brethren in Jerusalem (Romans 15:26-27, for example), so we have an obligation to provide material help for others.

We should also provide for each other spiritually. This means trying to make sure that the faith of every member is strong. It also means helping people to apply scriptural teaching in practice in everyday situations, at home, at work, and so on. This can be done formally, in any of the regular meetings of the ecclesia, but it is important also to have informal contact in each others' homes, and to be able to spend time together discussing the word of God and how it applies in practice. Things like home Bible reading groups, coffee mornings, and sisters' classes can be valuable in achieving this.

In the first century, as today, our ecclesias are made up of people from all walks of life and of different social standing. There are very few other earthly institutions where the poor and rich meet in equality together and where those of high social standing are regularly and willingly led by much more lowly (in the world's eyes) brethren.

Dealing with sin and weakness

It is helpful to provide the young people with an understanding of the New Testament teaching about ecclesial discipline. In the first century there was a different situation in that the apostles were able to speak with the authority given to them by the miraculous guidance of the holy spirit. We should not ignore, however, the fact that ecclesial discipline took various forms, with the withholding of fellowship reserved for rebellious and unrepented sins.

Are some sins worse than others?

You may need to be prepared for a discussion about this. The truth lies in balancing different points of view.

On one hand, some sins are worse than others:

- because of their effects on the sinner and those who are hurt by the sin - think of the effect of David's sin on him and his family (2 Samuel 12:10-14).

- if they are premeditated - so the sin of Judas and Caiaphas was greater than that of Pilate (John 19:11); the Pharisees would receive a greater condemnation (Mark 12:40); and the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath was punished by death (Numbers 15:30-32).

On the other hand, all sins are the same. James makes no distinction between 'having respect of persons' and murder or adultery (James 2:9-11). God forgives all sins equally (1 John 1:9). The prodigal son shows the pattern for us all; we don't know what his precise sins were, and so far the parable is concerned, it doesn't matter.

How are we to balance these apparently conflicting truths? We must separate the sin from its effects, as God does. We should not think that a sin cannot be forgiven simply because its effects are terrible, or because they continue (Numbers 14:20-23). It may be harder to repent from a premeditated sin, but that does not make repentance impossible or mean that it is not genuine.

Positive teaching in specific situations

The New Testament is full of situations where the apostles gave specific instructions in situations where there were problems - for example, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, Acts 20:30-31

'Rebuke, admonish, command'

Timothy and Titus were instructed to give instructions to members of the ecclesia in cases of sin (1 Timothy 5:20); or wrong teaching (1 Timothy 1:3-4; Titus 1:10-14)

Avoiding the company of unruly members

Members of the church were instructed to keep away from those who were refusing to obey the apostles' teaching, as in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-7 (the word which the AV translates 'withdraw' means 'avoid', as in the NIV) and verses 11-15. Similar words apply to those who were causing divisions, in passages such as Titus 3:10-11 ('heretic' means 'a divisive person'), or Romans 16:17-18).

Withholding fellowship

Finally, there are situations where we have to withhold fellowship from someone, perhaps because of persistent and unrepented sins, as in 1 Corinthians 5:5, 11-13. This means that someone is not allowed to break bread (v7-8), and also that ordinary friendship should be withheld (v11, and 2 John 1:7-10). Again, however, the aim is to cause someone to repent (v5), and we should always make it clear that if they do repent and change their way of life then they will be restored to fellowship.

Another reason to withhold fellowship is when someone persists in destructive false teaching, like Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Timothy 2:16-18). Presumably this is the

same problem as is referred to in 1 Timothy 1:19,20, where the same expression is used as in 1 Corinthians 5.

Summary

The chart in the students’ notes contains a selection of the passages mentioned above. Get them to look up the verses and to complete the summary of what they say. The completed chart could look something like this:

	What was the problem?	What should happen?	What was the motive?
1 Timothy 5:20	Unspecified sin	Public rebuke.	‘so that the others may take warning’
Titus 1:10-14	Wrong teaching	Rebuke.	‘so that they will be sound in the faith’
2 Thessalonians 3:11-15	Refusing to obey the scripture	Avoid them	‘so that he may feel ashamed’
Romans 16:17-18	Causing divisions	Avoid them	to avoid divisions in the church.
1 Corinthians 5:5-7, 11-13	Serious and unrepented, sins	Withhold personal and ecclesial fellowship	to save the person concerned and to protect others.
1 Timothy 1:19,20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18	Destructive False Teaching	Withhold personal and ecclesial fellowship	‘that they may learn not to blaspheme’

Some key lessons

Bring out some general points that come from these passages:

- There seem to have been several levels of action - a ‘sliding scale’, where individuals were taught, admonished, shunned, until finally fellowship was withheld.
- There was always a known and positive motive
- The sinner would have known what was going on and would have understood the motive

Relevance to our lives

It is a characteristic of all human beings that we want to belong. At school we become friends with people in the same class, or those with whom we have

something in common. As adults, mothers of young children become friends; people who work for the same company have, at least, something to talk about. The world is full of clubs of people who share an interest in classic cars, caravans, sports, and so on.

The fellowship of believers is in some ways similar. We share a relationship with God, and a faith in the Lord Jesus, which brings us together. Unlike purely human relationships, however, we have no choice about who else shares it. We do not have fellowship with our brothers and sisters because we like them or get on well, and ecclesial life is not something we can take or leave depending on the weather or what is on television. It should be one of the driving forces of our lives, and it should be our constant prayer and desire to strengthen it.

Our fellowship with God changes our view of others. They are loved by him - brothers and sisters for whom Christ died - and we should love each other as a result.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, who sets the solitary in families, we thank you that in your wisdom you have placed us in ecclesias, so that in the fellowship of our brothers and sisters we can grow together in your grace. Help us to make sure that we always do and say things that will build up the faith of those around us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

If the young people are not aware of it, you may like to discuss with them the statement of faith.