

Together in Christ

Living as a Christian Community



Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth
10 Studies for small groups

Contents

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Studies on Living as a Christian Community

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Introduction

Together in Christ

As global communications become more widespread, the internet moves into every home, the number of telephones that people have increases and more people carry mobile ‘phones and ‘blackberries’ with them at all times, the world is facing a growing problem—loneliness. Rather than improving relationships between people, modern communication technology is isolating us more and more.

Recently I had a heated discussion with some of the young people at ‘The House Thing’. One of them mentioned that they had been ‘talking’ to a friend on a social networking website. I casually mentioned that in that case they had not been ‘talking’ to their friend at all: talking carries with it the notion of hearing the person’s voice, picking up their emotions in the intonation of their words and discerning meaning from the way they spoke. It might even imply a face to face encounter with all the benefits of visual clues and non-verbal communication. Oh boy - did the young people tell me how wrong I was, and that electronic conversations on the internet or mobile ‘phone were just as valid as face to face conversations! Having reflected on this encounter for a few weeks, I still believe that I was essentially right (of course!!!). The more time that we spend ‘talking’ digitally, the less time we spend building meaningful relations with real people. The more time we spend in our homes watching the T.V., or on our computers, the less time we will spend interacting with others. The more time we spend isolated in our cars during the morning commute or on long journeys, the more isolated we will become as people. I would even go as far to suggest that the more time we spend watching ‘Songs of Praise’ or the ‘God Channel’, the less time we seem to be spending in ‘real’ worship with others.

As our community changes and this sense of loneliness increases, Tabernacle has Good News to share with our neighbours. God never intended us to live alone, and has offered a life changing pattern to solve the problem of loneliness. Indeed, right at the beginning of the creation God said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). The Trinity

itself reveals that God lives in a community of three in one. The Church, God's blueprint for community, has been given to us as a place of mutual support, love, recognition and protection.

I believe in the local church! It is the hope for our nation, and can achieve change in a way no other organisation can. This is why I talk so frequently about the importance of being at church for worship and teaching and in a small group for study and fellowship. It is no surprise to me that the people who feel most negative about Tabernacle are the ones who are not very regular attendees and who almost without exception have not joined a small group. The Church is God's blueprint for a healthy Christian life.

As well as being the place where we can find meaningful relationships, Church is also the place which reflects the values of the Kingdom of God. It is meant to be a place of healing, of forgiveness, of love and acceptance and the place where the needy find help. It is the place where barriers between people of different cultures, colours, nationalities and backgrounds are broken down and we are made one in Christ. We belong to a most amazing organisation!

These studies are designed to help us reflect again on this group of people that we belong to that we call 'church'. For all its warts and carbuncles (and every church has them) it is a most wonderful, glorious and God given thing. I pray that as we study it afresh, we might begin to appreciate all the more the incredible beauty of the church, and see it for what it really is—nothing less than the bride of Christ.

Pastor Roger Grafton

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1. Materials that last forever

Ephesians 2:11-22

Group Discussion

Have you ever belonged to an organisation outside of the church which, in your judgement, failed to achieve its objectives? What made it less than effective as an organisation?

Personal Reflection

Think about negative experiences you've had with an organisation or group. Perhaps it was a bad experience of church. How did the experience affect your future involvement in similar groups?

The Christian community, according to the apostle Paul, has been built for us with strong and lasting materials. As you read, keep in mind that the first Christians were Jewish. As non-Jews (Gentiles) began to join the faith, they did not share the religious and cultural heritage of the Jewish people. The church decided very early that the Jewish rite of circumcision was not necessary for a Gentile who accepted Christ (Acts 15:1-21). *Read Ephesians 2:11-22.*

Questions

1. How would you describe Paul's emotions about Christ and the church?

2. From this passage, can you tell what was the relationship between Jew and Gentile was like before Christ came?

3. What differences in background and culture threaten the unity of Tabernacle?

4. What is meant by “the dividing wall of hostility” (v.14).

5. If Christ himself “is our peace” then how did he accomplish this peace?

6. How do these “dividing walls” keep people from hearing the gospel?

7. In verse 19 Paul compares Christians to citizens and family members. In what ways does each of these two comparisons hold true?

8. In our own church, who would you describe as “good citizens” or “good family members” (v19)?

9. What building materials is the church made of in verses 20-22?

10. The apostles and prophets (v.20) can represent the New Testament and Old Testament. Why are the Scriptures vital as the foundation of our Christian community?

11. Verse 22 identifies the true resident of the “building”. How does his presence affect your attitude towards the church?

12. In your relationship to Tabernacle, consider ways in which you might resemble a pile of stones lying off to one side, instead of an integral part of the building. How will you become a more functional part of this dwelling place of God that is under construction (v.21)?

Pray that our church will grow into the kind of spiritual temple that Paul evokes. Pray especially that your own involvement in the church will further that growth.

Now or Later

This week try to be aware of what sort of “brick” or “stone” you are in the spiritual dwelling which is the church. Ask yourself, *Am I too much of an individual, not fitting into the whole? Do I take on too great a role as though I want to control the entire building? Do I appreciate the value of other parts of the building?*

2. EVERYONE GETS TO PLAY!

1 Corinthians 12

Group Discussion

What abilities do you appreciate about each other? Take a few minutes to name some things. You may praise talents such as musical or athletic ability, but also try to concentrate on character qualities such as encouragement, hospitality or compassion.

Personal Reflection

What unique ability or talent do you most enjoy using?

The church in Corinth was a collection of 'soloists' who needed to learn to play in harmony. They had a nightmarish list of problems, including bitter strife, sexual immorality and drunkenness at the Lord's Supper! Paul sets forth the picture of a church where everyone has a part and all parts fit together into a whole. Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is Paul's central message for the Christian's in Corinth?
2. When have you needed the same sort of advice Paul gave the Corinthians?
3. Contrast the Corinthians' previous lives as pagans and their present lives as Christian believers (vv.1-3).

4. Given the common source of all spiritual gifts, what should be their results (vv. 4-7)?

5. What factors may cause the outcome to be otherwise?

6. How do each of the gifts mentioned in verses 8-10 contribute to the unity of the church?

7. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. In what ways is the human body an appropriate metaphor for the church of Jesus Christ?

8. How should each of us be personally encouraged by the truth about gifts in verse 18?

9. According to Paul, how can we avoid divisions in the church (vv. 21-25)?

10. Look again at verses 21-25. In what ways have you failed to give honour to the weaker parts of the body of Christ?

11. What are some practical ways to give honour to those “parts of the body” which are typically regarded as “less honourable” (v23)?

12. Focus on verses 27-31. What do you consider to be your spiritual gift(s)?

13. How will you seek “the greater gifts” (v31)?

Ask for the Lord’s forgiveness for any selfish ways you have used your gifts. If you are studying in a group, express prayers of thankfulness for one another’s gifts.

Now or Later

How are you currently using your spiritual gifts to strengthen community in your church? This week how will you seek to use your gifts to serve others?

3. NO-ONE LEFT UNINVITED

Philemon

Group Discussion

Compose and invitation which you would like very much to receive:

invites you to

on

at

Personal Reflection

1. Think of a time you failed to get an invitation when it seemed everyone else was invited. How did you feel?

The fellowship of believers is intended to be a place of healing, forgiveness and equality. In a short letter, Paul urges Philemon and his church to restore to their membership a runaway slave, Onesimus. *Read Philemon.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Paul hope to accomplish by writing this letter?
2. Paul's other writings show he could express himself in a very authoritative manner. How would you describe the tone of this letter?
3. Think of a time when you were asked (or expected) to include someone who was undesirable. How did you respond?
4. How does Paul encourage his readers (vv. 1-7)?
5. What appeal does he then make to them (vv. 8-11)?
6. Onesimus's name means "useful". How does Paul play on this name in verse 11?
7. Why do you think Paul made this pun in a serious letter?
8. What changes are implied in Onesimus's life (vv. 10-12)?

9. Despite the changes, why was Onesimus an unlikely candidate for full acceptance into the church?

10. How does Paul build a case for reconciliation in verses 12-22?

11. What types of people are unlikely candidates for acceptance in your church?

12. Martin Luther King wrote, "Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus Paul also does for Onesimus with Philemon." How does Paul use his own standing with his readers to further the cause of Onesimus? (See especially vv. 17-18.)

13. How can you stand up for those whom your church might overlook or even reject?

Pray for those who need to feel included in your group or church. avoid general prayers and consider specific names of people.

Now or Later

Make plans to get to know someone in your church whom you have overlooked. Also make plans to reach out to someone who is not yet part of your church but who needs to find welcome there.

4. A GATHERED COMMUNITY

Psalm 100

Group Discussion

Describe a worship service that was particularly meaningful to you. Try to get beyond features of 'worship style' and talk about why that time touched you so deeply.

Personal Reflection

What are the most important aspects of worship for you?

Some of the psalms are personal; others express and encourage group worship. While Psalm 23 is the most cherished personal psalm, Psalm 100 is the best-loved "community" psalm. *Read Psalm 100.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What evidence do you find that this psalm encourages group worship rather than individual worship?

2. Who or what encourages you to gather with other believers in worship?

3. Where is the focus of this psalm?

4. In this psalm, what are worshippers urged to do? (Look for specific commands or instructions.)

5. The “gates” and the “courts” of verse 4 refer to the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Why is it important to have a special place of worship?

6. For what reasons are we to “enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise” (vv. 4-5)?

7. Why are thanks and praise essential elements of worship?

8. How can corporate worship help our personal worship when we don’t feel particularly thankful or full of praise?

9. Why do you think some Christians avoid corporate worship?

10. The psalms are actually songs, although the tunes are lost to us. How do the songs you sing tell of God's love and faithfulness?

11. What story of God's love and faithfulness can you share, perhaps from your own family history?

12. What opportunities this week do you have to join in corporate worship?

13. How will you take advantage of those opportunities?

Pray that your experiences of community worship will be marked with joy and dedication to Christ. Ask the Lord to protect your church from strife that distracts from and interferes with worship.

Now or Later

Taking off from question 11, write a psalm which tells a story of the Lord's goodness in your life, the life of your family, your church or someone else you know. Plan a time to get together and read your psalms to one another. Make this a time of mutual encouragement and corporate praise.

5. A SENT COMMUNITY

Luke 10:1-20

Group Discussion

Which of these words or phrases come to your mind when you think of the word *evangelism*?

- pressure
- sharing the good news
- TV preachers
- guilt that I don't do it enough
- a crusade in a big arena with a famous preacher
- going out on the streets talking to strangers
- fear
- a church committee
- other: _____

Personal Reflection

What are some reasons you may hesitate to share your faith with someone?

Few associate evangelism with community activity. In the New Testament, however, it is almost always a pair or group of believers who share their faith. Even Paul travelled with partners. Luke's Gospel gives an account of Jesus commissioning his community to spread their faith (Luke 9:1-6). Later he sent out a larger group of followers on a similar mission. *Read Luke 10:1-20.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some appealing and unappealing features of the work Jesus gave these seventy-two people?
2. When has the Lord given you a job that had both blessings and dangers?
3. Why do you think Jesus sent these people out in pairs (v.1)?
4. How do you account for Jesus' two prohibitions in verse 4?
5. How do whose cautions apply to believers today who want to carry out Jesus' mission?
6. Consider the responsibility given to believers in verse 16. How should that encourage us?
7. How should that responsibility humble us?
8. What is the response of the seventy-two to their completed mission (v. 17)?

9. How did Jesus characterise the nature of their mission (vv. 18-19)?
10. Jesus cautioned against an attitude of spiritual arrogance in verse 20. How might a Christian who is active in witnessing fall into such arrogance?
11. What are some ways your community of believers reaches out to others in active witness?
12. How can your community of believers work together to better carry out the work of evangelism?
13. What role do you see yourself playing in the evangelistic work of your fellowship?

Pray for people who need to come to faith in Christ. Pray also for each other, that you will encourage each other in the work of evangelism. Ask the Lord to give your fellowship opportunities to witness and the courage and wisdom to follow through.

Now or Later

Brainstorm ways your group can plan an outreach activity. It can be anything that brings you into positive and friendly contact with people who need your witness.

6. A SERVING COMMUNITY

Matthew 25:31-46

Group Discussion

What is the most meaningful act of service that a group has ever provided to you or your family?

Personal Reflection

Which have you found more rewarding – being served or serving? Why?

In the last week of Jesus' earthly life he came to Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish spiritual and political life and the site of God's temple. Sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, he talked about his future return and how Christians should behave in the interim. Then he painted a vivid picture of future judgement. *Read Matthew 25:31-46.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What contrasts are made throughout this passage?
2. In Jesus' story, what is the setting (v. 31)?
3. On what basis are the "sheep and goats" divided (vv. 34-36)?

4. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you think about the division of the sheep and goats?

5. As you imagine yourself before the throne on that day, with which group do you see yourself being put, and why?

6. What do the services described in verses 35-36 have in common?

7. Why do you think those on the king's right are surprised by what he says (vv. 37-39)?

8. It is possible to read this story and conclude that we must earn salvation through our actions. How do you respond to that interpretation, and why?

9. In what sense is Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, in need of clothing, sick and in prison (vv. 40, 45)?

10. What, for you, would be the effect of seeing Jesus himself in the faces of helpless people?

11. What does this passage say to you about the priority of service in your own Christian community?

12. What practical changes can you and your church bring about to make service a higher priority?

Pray for God to create in you the heart of a servant. Pray for faithful servants of God in your church and community.

Now or Later

Come up with more answers to question 12, and consider how to put one or more of them into practice. Identify resources you will need and people to invite on board. As you plan, keep in mind the need to develop a servant's heart rather than to work for any selfish motives or to earn salvation.

7. A PENITENT COMMUNITY

Nehemiah 9:1-56; James 5:13-20

Group Discussion

What group of people during the last few years have you been the most open and transparent with? Why?

Personal Reflection

Do you find it helpful to tell your sins to another person? Why or why not?

The book of Nehemiah tells of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls – and its community – after a generation of foreign exile and captivity in Babylon. When the walls were completed, Ezra the priest began to read the book of the Law to the assembled people. After celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days, the people gathered to confess their sins. *Read Nehemiah 9:1-5.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What was the mood of this assembly?
2. How did the Israelites prepare for confession (vv. 1-2)?
3. Does the idea of public confession of sin appeal to you or repel you? Explain why you respond as you do.

4. How did the Israelites use their time at the confessional gathering (vv. 2-3)?

5. The reading of the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament) was followed by confession and worship (v. 3). Why do both make sense as a response to hearing God's Word?

6. Levites (vv. 4-5) were the priests of Israel. How can church leaders be involved in helping the Christian community in confession?

7. Nehemiah 9 portrays people confessing sin with each other. Many years later, James wrote about confessing sin to each other – a more difficult and humbling challenge. *Read James 5:13-20*. What point does James make about trouble, happiness and illness in verses 13 and 14?

8. How are confessions and corporate prayer connected (vv. 14-16)?

9. What examples of righteous praying does James set forth in verses 17-18?

10. How does James stress the urgency of our accountability to each other (vv. 19-20)?
11. What are some helpful guidelines you've learned for when, how and what to confess to others?
12. In what areas do you need to become more transparent with your fellow believers?

Pray for courage to confess your sins honestly and promptly before God. Pray for more honesty with others concerning your struggles with sin. At the same time, pray for wisdom that confession will never be inappropriate or self-serving.

Now or Later

Have a time of repentance when each person writes specific sins privately on paper. Some may be read aloud if appropriate. Pray for each other in your struggles with sin. Read aloud several Scriptures about the mercy of God in Christ. Then burn the papers together. Sing some songs of thankfulness for Jesus' death on the cross for you. Your sins are gone as surely as the burned paper is gone!

9. A FORGIVING COMMUNITY

Matthew 18:15-35

Group Discussion

How do you feel after an argument with a friend or close family member?

- terrible
- angry
- embarrassed
- justified
- regretful
- relieved
- other _____

Personal Reflection

How do you tend to handle conflict?

Even when Jesus' followers were still few, they already had questions about how to get along with each other. *Read Matthew 18:15-20.*

Questions for Discussion

1. In general, what sort of situation among Christians is Jesus talking about?

2. Without giving unnecessary detail, have you experienced this type of situation in church?

3. What wisdom is there in confronting an offender alone (v. 15)?

4. We often hear that we should 'deal with conflict in accordance with Matthew 18.' However, Matthew 18:15-16 deals with serious sin (which leads to a person being thrown out of the fellowship and treated like a 'pagan') rather than personal disagreements between believers. What should be the first step if you feel someone has offended you? Isn't Jesus' model actually to forgive unconditionally?

5. In the quiet of your own heart, consider a time when you have confronted someone about a wrong. How did your experience compare with verses 15-17?

6. How do verses 18-20 affirm the reconciling power of praying together?

7. In response to Jesus' teaching about how to approach someone who has done wrong, Peter asked a question. The query motivated Jesus to tell a parable. *Read Matthew 18:21-35.* What is the progression of events in the story?

8. Ten thousand talents (v.24) would equal millions of pounds, a sum no one could have paid. Why do you think Jesus used such a staggering total in his story?

9. How would it be possible for the forgiven man to so quickly turn on his fellow servant without mercy?

10. In what ways are you like the angry servant in verse 28?

11. How can your church or fellowship group apply the wisdom of this passage to the conflicts you face?

12. What is more important? Putting another person right when they have upset you, or forgiving them whatever the cost?

Think about people you need to forgive. Pray for them. Ask God to help you show them the mercy which Christ has shown you.

Now or Later

If you are aware that there is someone you have offended or sinned against, or who has offended or sinned against you - forgive them. If needs be, go and put it right with them face to face.

9. A HEALING COMMUNITY

Ezekiel 34:1-16

Group Discussion

The last time you were ill for an extended period of time, how were you cared for and by whom?

Personal Reflection

How do you feel when you have to depend on others?

In the King's community, the citizens are protected, loved and healed. The prophet Ezekiel offers a prophetic warning against forsaking that task. *Read Ezekiel 34:1-16.*

Questions for Discussion

1. Describe the situation in Israel according to these verses.
2. According to verses 4-5, what were the five responsibilities which Israel's leaders failed to carry out?
3. What were the tragic results of the leaders' failure to carry out their mission (vv. 1-8)?

4. Consider a church or fellowship where the leaders do carry out faithfully the responsibilities of verses 4-5. What difference does their faithfulness make in the life of that group?

5. How did the Lord react to the unfaithful shepherds' behaviour (vv. 7-10)?

6. Count the number of times the word / occurs in verses 11-16 (God speaking). What does the repetition of that little word tell you about God?

7. What else do we learn about the Lord's character from his words in verses 11-16?

8. Although the Lord himself steps in to fill the leadership gap, it is clear from verses 1-8 that he desires his appointed leaders to do their jobs. What are your own God-given responsibilities in the church?

9. Where are you tempted to slack off in your responsibility to God's "flock"?

10. How can you encourage the leaders of our fellowship to take more seriously their responsibilities to the weak, as suggested by this passage?

11. This week, what is one way you will personally address one or more of the responsibilities to the weak, as suggested by this passage?

strengthen the weak

bring back the strays

heal the sick

search for the lost

bind up the injured

12. What will you do to help the church carry out each of those tasks?

Ask God to show you the weak, wounded and lost you've been called to heal, and to move you to positive action.

Now or Later

Draw a picture or write a description of what your church would look like if it were truly a 'haven for healing'. Keep it where you can see it frequently, so it reminds you to both pray and work toward making that vision reality. Feel free to revise the picture or written description as you get more insight into what makes a church that sort of healing fellowship

7. “AND THEY WILL KNOW ...”

John 13:1-17, 34-35

Group Discussion

Name some recent movies and popular songs on the theme of love. what message did they carry about the subject?

Personal Reflection

Write two definitions of *love*: one from a worldly perspective and one from a Christian perspective.

The scene is the Last Supper. Jesus is about to die and knows it. He has tried to tell his disciples, but they don't want to hear it. At the time when they should be most united, they revive an old argument about which of them is the greatest (Luke 22:24). Jesus takes action to teach them about love. *Read John 13:1-17, 34-35.*

Questions for Discussion

1. What filled Jesus' thoughts as this scene began (vv.1-3)?
2. Picture yourself as one of the disciples. Describe Jesus' actions in verses 4-6 from your perspective.
3. How would you have reacted when you saw Jesus do the things in verses 4 and 5? Why did Peter object so strongly (vv. 6-8)?

4. What had Peter realised to make him respond as he did in verse 9?

5. Imagine that you are the next disciple after Peter. What do you say and do when Jesus kneels before you to wash your feet?

6. How did Jesus intend for the disciples to take his example and put it into action (vv. 12-17)?

7. What should be a Christian's standard for loving (v. 34)?

8. How will love affect the disciples' standing in the world (v. 35)?

9. What does this say about the world's own version of love? What "foot washing" have members of your church performed for one another recently?

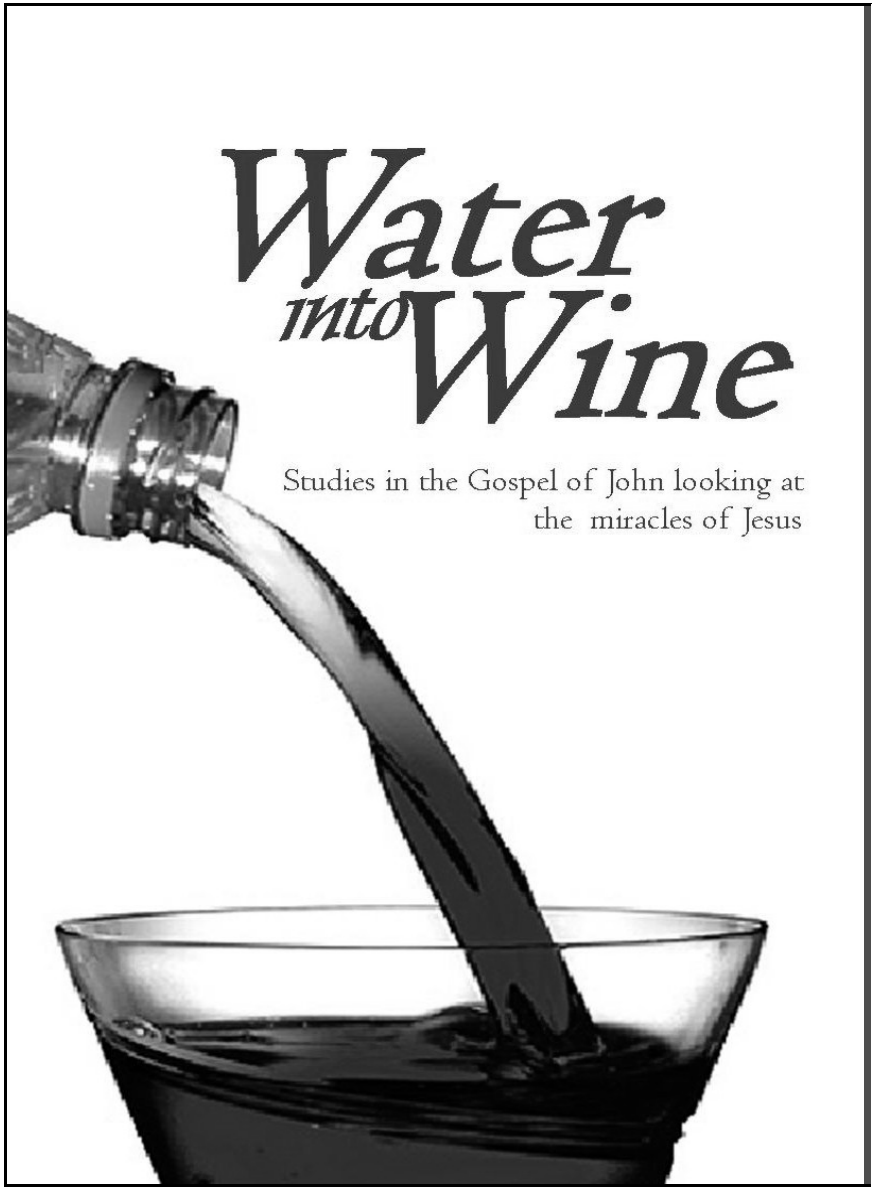
10. How can you do some "foot washing" for someone in your fellowship this week?

Pray that God will build your fellowship's mutual love, to the point that outsiders will recognise without doubt that you are Jesus' followers.

Now or Later

None of the disciples expected their Teacher and Lord to do such a humble act of service as washing their feet. What is an act of service that you consider beneath you? Imagine Jesus doing that action, and then follow his example.

Coming Next:



A series of studies looking at the miracles of Jesus from the fourth gospel.
Series prepared by Cedric Longville.

