

# What is Christian fellowship?

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[ 0 : 00 ] In 1954, J.R.R. Tolkien's epic saga, The Lord of the Rings, was first published as a series of three books.

Anybody read Lord of the Rings? Put up your hand. All right, not many, so let me tell you about it. It's the story of a fellowship of heroes who have to journey through many dangers, right into the stronghold of an evil enemy called Sauron, because that's the only way that they can destroy the most dangerous item in existence, which is the ring of power.

And what's interesting about the story is how popular it became. Selling over 150 million copies in no less than 38 languages around the world, The Lord of the Rings is the best-selling novel ever written, even today.

And its movie adaptations became the highest-grossing film trilogy of all time, topping, I might add, even Star Wars. And what's even more interesting is how popular the story is amongst Christians. It's no secret that J.R.R. Tolkien believed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and he was, in fact, instrumental in bringing his close friend C.S. Lewis to faith, whom some of you may have heard of.

[ 1 : 15 ] And it's no secret that the storyline of Lord of the Rings shares many parallels with the biblical story of our world, in that we all have a great enemy, Satan, and we all are under threat by his most powerful weapon, which is sin.

That is Satan's single most powerful weapon, and it's something that resides in all of us, and it threatens to separate us from God forever, our sin. And the only way that power could ever be broken is through someone heading straight into the heart of the enemy stronghold, which is exactly what Jesus did for us, when he went to the cross, and he died for sins, our sins, so that we can be forgiven.

And that's the only way that the power of sin over us, the penalty of sin over us, that hangs over us, because we know, all of us, that we are sinners. We know that we've broken God's law, and the only way that that penalty, that power, that guilt can be broken, is because of what Jesus did when he went into the enemy stronghold to destroy Satan's power, which is, of course, why you and I need to trust him.

If we want any hope of having eternal life, of coming back to God in real relationship, both in this life and in eternity. And it's because of what Jesus did for us that he now calls around him a fellowship to follow him into an eternal kingdom.

And so you see, there are many parallels between the story of Lord of the Rings and the biblical story, and of course, those must have influenced Tolkien when he was writing. But I think what makes the Lord of the Rings so popular is not just these parallels that resonate with us, but also the way that we can relate to the characters in that fellowship.

[ 2 : 56 ] And I'm not talking about the wise wizard Gandalf, and I'm not talking about the skilled elf Legolas, or the powerful King Aragorn, but rather I'm talking about the humble, unassuming four hobbits.

Those are the people that we can relate to, because they have no special skills, they're caught up in events much bigger than themselves, they're just ordinary folk in an extraordinary story, but they rise to the challenge.

And I think that's what we relate to, especially as Christians, don't we? Because if you've been with us in our journey through the book of Romans, you would have discovered that we are very much like those four hobbits.

And I'm not talking about the hairy feet. I'm talking about being ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary story. Because that's what Christians are, if you think about it.

Ordinary people with ordinary day jobs, but caught up in God's story, caught up in God's eternal plans to save this world from sin. Well, it's right here in the end of Romans that we find out just what that looks like, because it's here that we're introduced to another fellowship of people.

[ 4 : 10 ] Another group of ordinary people involved in God's extraordinary plans, and they knew it, and it came out in how they lived. They were the Christians in first century Rome, who Paul writes this letter to, and he greets a lot of them by name here, those he knew personally.

And it's in his comments about them that we, 2,000 years later, get a real window into their lives, into what it would have been like to be a Christian in that church, and what it means for them to be caught up in God's story.

So I want to go through this morning and introduce you to some of these people that Paul mentions. First, we meet a woman named Phoebe. So Paul writes to the Romans from verse 1, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cancray.

I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people, and give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me. Now, Phoebe wasn't actually a Roman.

She was a Greek woman who got the job of delivering Paul's letter to the Romans, which is no small task. And it's because she managed to do that that we have it in our Bibles today.

[ 5 : 24 ] So it was a trip that was ordained by God. And we learn about Phoebe that she's a woman of means, perhaps she's a business owner, and therefore she's able to afford the journey to Rome, and also she's called a benefactor, someone that uses her money to sponsor other Christians in ministry.

But we also learn that despite her wealth, and this is an interesting point, she's not above serving in her local church. She's called a deacon. Back then, that would have referred to those who did relatively menial tasks in their local church, things like serving meals to widows, or looking after the poor or the sick.

And so Phoebe, right here at the beginning of this list of names, Phoebe is an example to us, isn't she? She's an example of a Christian with money, a Christian with means, both in using that money to support word ministry, but also in not using that as an excuse to avoid getting her hands dirty in her local church with the service that's needed on the ground.

And that's what we learn from Phoebe, I think. That's how she stands out as an example to us. But there's more, because next we meet a couple called Priscilla and Aquila. Verse 3, Paul writes, Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus.

They risked their lives for me. Not only I, but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets in their house. Okay, so here's a married couple who we find out in Acts, that's where they first mention, that they ran a leather-making business.

[ 7 : 02 ] And Paul worked with them for a while to support his own ministry in Corinth. But we discover here, not only did they assist Paul and partner with them in work, but they also risked their lives for him.

And so they did far more. They did over and above just being work partners with Paul. They also worked for a while, we find out in Acts, they worked in Ephesus in their leather-making business. And it was in Ephesus that they met a man named Apollos. And we read in Acts that Apollos was a man who they came across, they invited into their home, and they told him about Jesus.

Apollos heard about Jesus from Priscilla and Aquila. We read later in Scripture, and we found out from history, that Apollos, not only did he go on to become a Christian, but he went on to become one of the greatest preachers and defenders of Christianity in the first century.

We also find out here that having returned to Rome, this couple continued using their home for gospel ministry because they were hosting a church there. That's what Paul mentions. And yet, the thing about Priscilla and Aquila, they were just an ordinary couple.

[ 8 : 15 ] Just ordinary couple in a leather-making business. But they show us that ordinary Christians can be used to do extraordinary work, can't they? If only we were willing, like them, to take risks, to open our homes, and to use whatever opportunities God might give us to talk about Jesus to those who haven't heard about him.

So I wonder what Priscilla's and Aquila's we have right here in St. Mark's, who maybe God has blessed with a nice home that they can open to use for gospel ministry as a place for people to come and hear the word of God in a similar way to Priscilla and Aquila.

Next, I want you to meet a woman called Mary. Now, not much is said about this Jewish convert to Christ. She's probably unmarried or a widow because there's no mention of a husband. But we are told one thing about her. Verse 6, Paul says, Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. And so when Paul thinks of Mary, the thing that stands out in his mind is her hard work for the Christians in Rome.

And the word Paul uses for work here is very interesting. In the original, it's not the ordinary word for work. It literally means to be wearied or spent with labor, to toil.

[ 9 : 33 ] And so here we've got an ordinary, unassuming woman who literally spends herself in labor for God's work. Which reminds us, as we read about her, that God's call to Christians is a call to work.

It's a call to work hard for the kingdom. It's not just a call to work when we can fit it into our schedules or when we have the energy to do it, but to work to the point of weariness like Mary did. Now, lots of people in today's world are quite willing to be spent or wearied by their secular work because that pays the bills. And we see it more and more in our busy world where expectations for work are so high and people are spent, so spent that they hardly have time to come to church. But the problem is they're so spent for secular work, the world's work, that they never have energy for God's work. Mary here challenges us to reverse those priorities, to put God's work before our worldly work and to be willing to be spent for that work first and foremost.

Next, we meet Andronicus and Junior. Verse 7, Greet Andronicus and Junior, my fellow workers, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me.

[ 10 : 55 ] They are outstanding among the apostles and they were in Christ before I was. Now, this is probably another married couple who ministered together and had been Christians way before Paul even was.

They were of Jewish origin, we know that from their names. And the fact that Paul says they are among the apostles may be referring to the group of 72 missionaries who were also called apostles who Jesus sent throughout Israel when he was still on earth.

So Andronicus and Junior may well have been part of those 72. And they had obviously been through a lot. At one time, we're told here, even being imprisoned with Paul. And so they remind us that there is a cost to following Jesus, isn't there?

But a cost that they were willing to bear because even being imprisoned didn't put them off. They were still serving actively in ministry after all that. And they didn't retire as well. They didn't say, okay, I've done enough ministry, I've ticked the box and now I can sort of retire and not get into trouble.

No, they were still involved in the Roman church. But there's another thing we learn from them which is interesting. We learn, along with Priscilla and Aquila, we learn that for a Christian married couple, ministry is a team effort.

[ 12 : 12 ] Whenever we read about couples like this in the New Testament, it's both of them who are involved in serving Christ, not just one of them with the other sitting home watching DSTV all the time.

And so it should be for all Christian couples. You see, Christian couples have the benefit of doing their work for Christ together and supporting each other in that and praying for each other in that. Both being involved in the same mission which is something that enriches their own relationship when they're both heading in the same way and they're both working towards the same thing. For example, I mean, I can't tell you how much it means to me that Gene loves Jesus and wholeheartedly serves him. I wouldn't be able to do what I did if it wasn't for that.

Next, we have Ampliatus who Paul greets in verse 8. Now, what's interesting about this man, Ampliatus, is that Ampliatus was a Roman slave name as were the next few names that Paul lists here, Obanus, Stachys, and Herodian.

Those were all slave names. So it tells us that obviously the Christian fellowship in Rome was quite mixed and not only mixed with Jews and Gentiles but also mixed with slave and free.

[ 13 : 26 ] And so you've got business owners and those in high society rubbing shoulders with the lowest of the low in society, but they're all brothers and sisters in Christ. They're all part of the same body and they're all doing the same work together.

And that kind of unity, which is just hinted at here in Romans, but we know of being a characteristic of a church, that kind of unity is very rare in our divided, segregated world that we live in, isn't it?

But it's one of the marks of a true Christian fellowship. And this Christian fellowship back in Rome, we see hints of it here. And that kind of unity is a reminder for us in our segregated society that what will mark us out as a church in our community, in our world, what will cause people to take notice is our unity despite our differences.

Our willingness to spend time with and work alongside the types of people that we would otherwise have avoided if it wasn't for the gospel. I mean, if you looked around now and you looked at the people who are sitting around you, would you have known these people?

Would you have spent time with these people, made friends with these people if it wasn't for our faith in Christ that brought us together? Probably not. It's our unity, you see. It's the thing that will stand us out.

[ 14 : 45 ] Jesus said, to his disciples, your love for one another, despite your different backgrounds, your love for one another is what will cause the world to take notice. This is how the world will know you're my disciples.

But there's another thing in particular about this slave, Ampliatus, which history uncovers. Because it's very likely that this Ampliatus is the same slave whose name was discovered by archaeologists inscribed in a burial chamber of a woman called Flavia Domitilla.

Now, why is that important? Well, because Flavia Domitilla was a cousin of Roman Emperor Domitian, who was one of the Roman emperors who persecuted the Christians.

And we're told by history that Flavia Domitilla was sent into exile by Domitian because she had become a Christian. And history tells us that before that she had fallen in love with and later married a slave called none other than Ampliatus.

A slave who was executed for his faith not long after Paul wrote this letter and a slave who probably brought Flavia Domitilla to faith in Christ. And this could well be the Ampliatus that Paul greets here.

[ 15 : 59 ] But he wasn't the only slave who had an influential position in the Roman church. Paul also writes, verse 10, Now, if you know your Roman history, you'll know that Aristobulus and Narcissus were high political figures.

Narcissus was one of the men who had the heir of the emperor. He was on his high council. And these households of these men were obviously high-powered political households.

Now, Aristobulus and Narcissus weren't Christians. They weren't involved in the local church. But Paul says to greet those in their household who are in the Lord, namely the slaves who worked in their household.

We also see he greets a man called Herodian. And Herodian was a slave name for someone who worked in the household of the Herods. Now, if you know your Bible, you'll know the Herods, also a very high-powered political family from Israel.

And so he greets all these slaves working in these high-powered homes. And it tells us that Christians from this humble Roman church were really infiltrating all over society.

[ 17 : 10 ] Now, the Roman church that Paul writes to is probably small. It's probably not much bigger than maybe a St. Mark's. But it had influence all over Roman society.

And many, like Ampliatus, were in very influential positions, no doubt using their positions for the gospel, as we see in Ampliatus' case. So what can we learn from them?

Well, you see, like them, we all have a role to play in society. But maybe your role in society, you don't think it's that important. You know, maybe you are some tiny cog in a huge corporation.

You're just a number. And often, you feel like a slave. Well, take heart from these slaves that Paul mentions. Take heart that you are still a valued member of God's business on earth.

And even a small cog can make a big difference. And use the opportunities God gives you to glorify Christ. No matter where God puts you in society, no matter how unimportant you think you are in society, you're not in God's eyes and you're there for a reason in the position he's put you.

[ 18 : 23 ] So take heart. After the slaves, in verse 13, Paul mentions a guy called Rufus and his mother. He says, greet Rufus chosen in the Lord and his mother who has been a mother to me too.

Now we're not sure, but it's very likely that this is the same Rufus mentioned in Mark chapter 15 whose father was Simon of Cyrene, the man who helped Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha.

Simon had probably died since, but if this is the same Rufus, then we learn that his son and his widowed wife were obviously now active members of the church in Rome.

And Paul says of Rufus that he is chosen in the Lord, maybe referring to his association with the events of the crucifixion, of his father being chosen to bear the cross with Jesus, and how this

seemingly random event brought not only Simon but his whole family, including Rufus and his mom, to faith in Christ.

But also, he says of Rufus' mother, she has been a mother to me too, says Paul. And so this family probably supported Paul in his travels, they probably knew Paul well, and they accommodated him and they cared for him in his various ministries.

[ 19 : 37 ] But it reminds us, doesn't it, that the Christian church is indeed a family, something that we often forget. It reminds us that how as a family we need to help each other and we need to treat each other as if we were each other's sons and daughters and mothers and fathers and brothers.

That's why you'll notice this morning for Father's Day we gave a gift to all men, whether or not you're a father because if you're part of Christ's body, you are. You are called to be a father to the younger children.

We are called to be a family. Like Rufus' mother was a mother for Paul and her example lives on for us in the pages of Scripture to remind us that we are a family.

Now there are more people Paul mentions I could go on for hours, I guess, talking about the other people Paul mentions, but we don't really have time for that. But what we do have time for is just to consider what these people teach us about what it means to be part of a Christian community.

You see, for the most part, they were ordinary people. Some were business people, some were slaves, some were married, some were single, but one thing that they all had in common was that all of them were caught up in the business of heaven.

[ 21 : 00 ] They knew that God had saved them and called them for a purpose and they were all actively involved in serving Christ in some way or another. They were ordinary people, but they were doing extraordinary work for an extraordinary God.

And I think that's something that we as Christians today can often forget. You see, it's very easy in the relatively persecution-free society that we live in, it's very easy to be a pew warmer.

Just to come to church, to take in, to listen to the sermon, to sing the songs, then to go home, but never really to be involved in God's work on earth. It's very easy to be a pew warmer.

I was a pew warmer for a long time. Even after I became a Christian, I was a pew warmer. When I was living in London, going to a church there, a very good evangelical church, looking back, I realized I wasn't much more than a pew warmer.

Sure, I served a bit, I helped stack chairs, things like that. I was on a roster or two. But you see, there's a big difference between that and really being involved in the work of Christ on earth, like these people in Rome were.

[ 22 : 15 ] And do you know what it helped me, what helped me to change? What helped me to change from being a pew warmer to taking Christ's mission seriously for myself as a Christian was a visit to the Palestinian West Bank on a church trip to Israel in 2005.

It's there that we met with a small Palestinian church, a group of Christians who were facing persecution from all sides. They were being persecuted from the Israelis in the West and they were being persecuted from the Muslim Palestinians in the East.

They had no friends. They were a church under persecution, very different to a church in Plumstead or London. And what struck me about these ordinary Palestinian Christians that has never left me since is that they were all, all of them, from the oldest to the youngest, from the richest to the poorest, not only were they all one big family but they were all involved somehow in the work of Christ on earth.

They all knew their part to play in that fellowship, even the children. They were involved in all kinds of ministries, all kinds of outreaches, all kinds of social work in order to help people and bring their fellow Muslims who were still their family members to Christ.

They were all involved in this mission and they were all thinking week in and week out how they can take Christ further, both to the Jews and the Muslims. And they were all involved in this mission and that's what struck me.

[ 23 : 41 ] It stood out so starkly in relation to Western churches that I was used to. And that, I think, is what the church in Rome would have been like. Each person was known, each person was a valuable part of the fellowship and each person was involved in God's work somehow.

And so I guess I'll finish by asking, are you? If Paul wrote a letter to St. Mark's Church, would your name be here at the end?

And what comment would Paul make about you? Think about that for a second. What comment would Paul put next to your name? Would he say, like Mary, that you spent yourself for the work of Christ?

Or would he say, like Priscilla and Aquila, that you took risks for the gospel? Or would he say, like Andronicus and Junia, that you suffered for the sake of the gospel? Or would he say, like Rufus and his mother, that you were a brother or sister or mother to the Lord's people in need?

Or would he say, oh, him? I never really knew him. He just came to the church and sat at the back.

[ 24 : 54 ] But he never really got involved. What comment would Paul make about you? More importantly, what comment will the Lord Jesus have for you when you stand before him to give an account for the time and the resources that he's given you on earth?

I pray that it'll be my good and faithful servant. You see, we're all on a great journey to a new restored creation.

And we're journeying together as a fellowship of people here in Plumstead. But before we can get there, we have a job to do here. A job that will demand our time, our money, our energy, and maybe even our lives.

That's the job that the Roman Christians were more than willing to do. And those are the things that the Roman Christians were more than willing to give because they knew that even though they were an ordinary group of people, they were caught up in extraordinary work, God's work on earth. Will you be involved in that same work? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this list of names and the comments that the Apostle makes of these people that stand as examples to us even 2,000 years later of a Christian community.

[ 26 : 12 ] Help us, Lord, to emulate those examples. Help us as a Christian community, as a fellowship here in Plumstead to really take seriously the work that you've called us to do.

And like these Christians in Rome, help us to work hard. Help us to take risks for the gospel. And through it, Lord, would your name be glorified. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.