

Discover Bible Studies

#20: The Secret of Growth through Fellowship

In the early 1960s, Brother Andrew, a man from Holland, smuggled a load of Bibles in his VW across the Romanian border and past communist guards. He checked into a hotel and began praying that God would lead him to the right Christian groups-the ones who could best use his copies of the Scriptures.

That weekend Andrew walked up to the hotel clerk and asked where he might find a church.

The clerk looked at him a little strangely and answered, "We don't have many of those, you know. Besides you couldn't understand the language."

"Didn't you know?" Andrew replied, "Christians speak a kind of universal language."

The clerk had never heard of it, but Andrew assured him, "It's the most beautiful language in the world."

Andrew was able to locate several church groups in the area and managed to arrange a meeting with the president and secretary of a certain denomination. Unfortunately, although both Andrew and these men knew several European languages, they found they had none in common. So there they sat staring at each other. Andrew had travelled many dangerous miles with his precious cargo, but there seemed no way of telling whether these men were genuine Christian brothers or government informants.

Finally he spotted a Romanian Bible on a desk in the office. Andrew reached into his pocket and pulled out a Dutch Bible. He turned to 1 Corinthians 16:20 and held the Bible out, pointing to the name of the book, which they could recognize. Instantly their faces lit up. They quickly found the same chapter and verse in their Romanian Bibles and read: "All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss."

The men beamed back at Andrew. Then one of them looked through his Bible and found Proverbs 25:25.

Andrew found the verse and read: "Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land."

These men spent half an hour conversing and sharing-just through the words of Scripture. They were so happy in this fellowship that crossed all cultural boundaries that they laughed until tears came to their eyes.

Andrew knew he had found his brothers. When he showed them his load of Bibles, the Romanians were overwhelmed and embraced him again and again.

That evening at the hotel, the clerk approached Andrew and remarked, "Say, I looked up 'agape' in the dictionary. There's no language by that name. That's just a Greek word for love."

Andrew replied, "That's it. I was speaking in it all afternoon."

Have you discovered that beautiful language? In this Guide you'll learn about how God can bring all of us into His great circle of love.

1. THE CHURCH CREATED FOR FELLOWSHIP

Jesus established the church in order to meet the basic human requirement of nurture and support. We all have needs. And that's what the church is all about. It's a place where we come to fellowship and help each other. Scripture reveals a dynamic apostolic church which called men and women into a joyful fellowship that extended all the way up to the Almighty:

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have FELLOWSHIP WITH US. And OUR FELLOWSHIP IS WITH THE FATHER AND WITH HIS SON, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our JOY COMPLETE." -1 John 1:3, 4. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

A community of hearts bonded through contact with Jesus and with one another, experience "joy" to the fullest! They're all speaking the same language, the language of love.

Christians become part of an extended family. They become brothers and sisters in Christ since all have a kindred spirit. The broader the unity of belief, the stronger the ties among Christians.

The members of the churches established by Jesus' apostles were bound together by their similar beliefs, their love of God, and their desire to serve Him and share His grace to the world. This close bond of fellowship was one of the reasons this powerless and persecuted minority turned the world upside down.

2. THE CHURCH CHRIST ESTABLISHED

Does Christ have a church, or is the whole idea of a religious organization just a human invention? Jesus answers:

"On this ROCK I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it." -Matthew 16:18, margin.

Jesus is the anchoring Rock, the Cornerstone, of His church.

What group formed a part of the foundation?

"Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." -Ephesians 2:20.

What did the Lord accomplish when the gospel was preached?

"And the Lord added to the CHURCH daily such as should be saved." -Acts 2:47 KJV.

When Jesus established the church, He promised that "the gates of hell will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18), and the Christian church still endures. It has had extremely powerful enemies-from Roman emperors to communist dictators-but the blood of martyrs has only caused it to grow stronger. When one Christian was burned at the stake or tossed to the lions, several others sprang up to take his or her place. Sceptics have done their best to reason the Christian Church away. But Christian truth competes more eloquently than ever in a scientific, secular age.

One of the church's greatest challenges came soon after its acceptance as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The church grew prosperous-and eventually was corrupted. It seemed spiritually dead in the Dark Ages. But the Lord always preserved a core of courageous and faithful believers who, in the bleak and difficult times, shone bright as stars on a moonless night.

Paul compares Christ's relationship to His church to a husband's tender, protective relationship to His wife (Ephesians 5:23-25). The church is a family, with each member establishing relationships to the other members of the family and contributing to their well-being (Ephesians 2:19).

Paul also represents the church as a living body, with Christ Himself as its head (Colossians 1:18).

When we are baptized, we testify to our faith in Jesus and become members of the "body," the church.

"For we were all BAPTIZED by one Spirit INTO ONE BODY." -1 Corinthians 12:13.

The book of Revelation pictures the risen Christ walking among the churches, showing His care over them (Revelation 1:20, 12, 13). Christ has never forsaken His people, and He never will.

3. A CHURCH WITH A PURPOSE

Church attendance is vital for a Christian. We need the support of others to keep our faith alive and growing.

The church also plays three other important roles:

(1) The church guards the truth.

As the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), the church upholds and defends God's truth before the world. We need the collective wisdom of other believers to help us focus on the essential truths of Scripture.

(2) The church is an example of what God's grace can do for sinners. The changes that Christ has made in the lives of believers give acclaim to the God who calls us "into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

(3) God's people are His witnesses to a needy world. Just before He returned to heaven, Jesus promised His disciples:

"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.

It is a great privilege for the church to take the message of God's tremendous love worldwide.

4. **ORGANIZED FOR STRENGTH**

The church that Christ established had a definite organization. One could be included in, or excluded from, its membership (Matthew 18:15-18). God's church appointed leaders and had a world headquarters as well as local meeting places (Acts 8:14; 14:23; 15:2; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). When they were baptized, believers joined an organized group. (Acts 2:41 and 47).

The church exists for mutual encouragement.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but LET US ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER and all the more as you see the Day [of Christ's coming] approaching." -Hebrews 10:24, 25.

This is, in a nutshell, what a healthy church group does. Its members build each other up in the faith, they encourage one other. God organized His church to strengthen God's people and also to serve the world. We can do far more together than we can as isolated individuals. Take just one example: the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We carry on an extensive medical work around the world-from inner-city health vans to clinics in remote islands of the South Pacific. Our educational institutions have brought tens of thousands of youth to a knowledge of a better life in Christ-from Loma Linda University, pioneering in heart transplants, to tiny mission schools scattered through the

African interior. We carry on famine and disaster relief through ADRA. Local churches help clothe and feed the poor and homeless at thousands of Community Service Centres. And groups of Adventist believers are sharing the message of salvation in more than 200 countries. Only an organized group of dedicated Christians could have this worldwide impact.

Christ and the apostles compared the church to a body, and pointed out that all parts of the body are needed (1 Corinthians 12:21-28). All body parts are not exactly alike, yet all are important and all must work together in harmony. An eye separated from the body can't see. A hand cut off has no value. Whether we are an eye, a hand, or only a finger, we can't be truly effective for Christ totally on our own. Belonging to a church, being united to the other members of the body, strengthens us as Christians.

5. THE JOY OF WORSHIP

Deep in our hearts lies a longing to worship God, and that need can wither away unless given expression. How did the psalmist feel when he thought about going to a place of worship?

"I REJOICED with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" -Psalm 122:1.

What part does music have in public worship?

"Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs." -Psalm 100:2.

The Bible tells us that giving offerings is an appropriate part of divine worship.

"Bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness." Psalm 96:8-9.

Prayer is also a vital aspect of public worship.

"Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker." -Psalm 95:6.

Bible study and preaching are central to New Testament worship. Beginning with Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, found in Acts 2, and from the time of the Protestant Reformers to our day, every great religious revival has been based on biblical preaching. Why? Because "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

6. WHAT'S RIGHT WITH THE CHURCH?

Some object that the church is full of imperfect people. What Henry Ward Beecher said is true: "The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones."

Since none of us is perfect, the church will never be perfect either. In one of His parables Jesus reminded us that weeds grow among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). When we read the New Testament letters of Paul, we discover that the apostolic church had critical problems. And the church today often has serious defects. But please remember that no faulty congregation can ever destroy or disturb the Great Cornerstone of the church- Jesus Christ Himself. So in imperfect churches we must keep our primary gaze on the Saviour who ministers to us. Despite its faults, the church belongs to Him, so focus on Christ.

"CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH AND GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR HER to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." -Ephesians 5:25-27.

The church is so important to Jesus that He "gave himself up for her" when He died for each of us individually and for the church collectively. So church membership should be important to you. Are you a member of Christ's body?

7. FINDING A CHURCH

How many true faiths does Jesus have in the world?

"There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, ONE FAITH, one baptism." -Ephesians 4:4, 5.

Since Christ has only "one faith," how can we know which one it is? Jesus gives us the key:

"If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." -John 7:17. (See also John 8:31, 32.)

When we make a commitment to do God's will, He will help us see whether the teaching is from God or is only human tradition. The key ingredient when finding a church is examining its respect for and allegiance to the Word of God. Genuine fellowship is built around Scripture, not just around a charismatic leader or a great institution.

Continue making discoveries in these guides, walk in the light as God reveals it to you from the Bible, and He will make plain His will for you. A growing Christian is a person who opens heart and mind to accept the truth as God reveals it from His Word.

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