



DISCOVER

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

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The Secret of
Growth Through
Fellowship



BEFORE FREEDOM to practice Christianity came to Romania, a man from the Netherlands known as Brother Andrew smuggled a load of Bibles in his Volkswagen Beetle 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 wouldn’t understand the language.”

“Don’t you know?” Andrew replied. “Christians speak a kind of universal language.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“It’s called *agape*.”

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 one of them. 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 across the room. Andrew had traveled hundreds of dangerous miles with his precious cargo, but there seemed to be 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 out his Bible, 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 brethren greet you. 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 in his Dutch Bible and read: “As cold water to a weary soul, so is good news from a far country.”

These men spent half an hour conversing and sharing—just through the words of Scripture. They were so happy in this fellowship—one 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 cache 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 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 Was 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 not a place where we come to show off our "good works" like some fancy new hat. It's a place where we come to help each other. The early church became a fellowship of believers committed to each other. A description of it reads:

"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. . . . And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42, 47).

Scripture reveals a dynamic early church that called men and women into a fellowship with God as well as with each other:

"That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full" (1 John 1:3, 4).

The church is a community of hearts, bonded through contact with Jesus and one another, experiencing joy to the fullest. The Bible clearly says that we are to "serve one another" (Galatians 5:13), forgive as we are forgiven (Ephesians 4:32), and "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Christians become part of an extended family. They become brothers and sisters in Christ.

The broader the unity of similar belief, the stronger the ties among Christians. A Seventh-day Adventist youth serving his country as a soldier discovered the value of such ties. He said, "Wherever I went in a foreign country, I had friends, even though I really knew no one. I would look up those at our mission stations,

and I found that our shared beliefs and hopes tied our hearts together. It wasn't a casual thing; we trusted each other and found a real warmth of fellowship. I was treated like a member of the family in homes where we could speak only a few words to each other."

The members of the churches established by Jesus' apostles were bound together by their similar beliefs, love of God, and desire to serve Him and share His grace with the world. This close bond of fellowship was one of the reasons why this seemingly powerless and persecuted minority turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

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 Hades [hell] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus is the anchoring Rock, the Cornerstone, of His church. What group formed a part of the foundation?

"[It was] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

What did the Lord accomplish when the gospel was preached?

"The Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

When Jesus established the church, He promised that "the gates of Hades [hell] shall not prevail against 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.

The church has often been driven into hiding, but it emerges from the deserts and caves somehow stronger than ever. Skeptics have done their best to reason the Christian church away and have often predicted it would disappear with other “superstitions.” However, 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 became more and more prosperous, and corruption spread.

It seemed spiritually dead in the Dark Ages, but the Lord always preserved a core group of courageous and faithful believers who, even in the most bleak and difficult times, shone as bright as stars on a moonless night. The word *church* literally means “the called-out ones.” God creates His special people from those He has summoned out of the world.

Paul compares Christ’s relationship with His church to a husband’s tender, protective relationship with his wife:

“For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23).

The church is a family, with each member establishing relationships with the other members of the family and contributing to their well-being.

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

Paul also represents the church as a living body, with Christ Himself as its head.

“He [Jesus Christ] is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18).

How do we become a member of Christ’s body, the church?

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

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

The book of Revelation pictures churches as golden lampstands (Revelation 1:20). What is Jesus’ relationship to these lampstands?

“I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man” (Revelation 1:12, 13).

John saw the risen Christ walking among His churches, showing His care over them and His presence with them through the years. Christ has never forsaken His people, and He never will.

3 | A Church With Purpose

Someone once said that a Christian who doesn’t attend church is like a baseball player who doesn’t belong to a team, a soldier who isn’t part of the army, or a honeybee without a hive. Yet recent polls indicate that less than half of all Americans claim to attend church regularly, and the real number is less than half of that. A lot of people today have bought into the idea that religion is a strictly

private matter and that being part of a church isn't important to their spiritual well-being.

However, we need the support of other Christians to keep our faith alive and productive. Individuals need the church, because fellowship helps us grow. The church also plays three other important roles:

A. The church guards the truth.

“The church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).

The church upholds and defends God's truth before the world. It's easy for individuals, following their own varied points of view, to go off on all kinds of doctrinal detours. It's simply not realistic to believe that truth is whatever you find in your heart.

Truth is what God says is true. We need the collective wisdom of other believers to help us focus on the essential truths of Scripture.

B. The church is an example of what God's grace can do for sinners.

“You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His [God's] own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

The changes that Christ makes in the lives of believers attest to the incredible God who calls us “into His marvelous light.” The church is built on Jesus, the epitome of “the mystery of godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16). Its strength rests on Christ's presence in the heart of the Christian.

C. God's people are His witnesses to a needy world.

Just before He returned to heaven, Jesus promised His disciples:

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

It’s a great privilege for the church to take the message of God’s tremendous love worldwide. We have a great responsibility as Christians to represent God to the people in our lives.

4 | Organized for Strength

The church that Christ established, the New Testament Christian church, had a definite organization. It had leaders—the apostles, elders, and deacons (Acts 8:14; 14:23; 15:2; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). When individuals accepted Jesus and were baptized, they became part of this “church,” a defined, organized group (Acts 2:41-47).

The church exists for mutual encouragement:

“Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day [of Christ’s coming] approaching” (Hebrews 10:24, 25).

This, in a nutshell, is what a healthy church group does. Its members build each other up in the faith, and encourage one another.

God organized His church to strengthen His people as they perform acts of service for the world. The fact is, we can do far more when we are united together as God’s people than we can as isolated individuals. Take just one example: The Seventh-day Adventist Church. We are engaged in extensive medical work around the world—from inner-city health vans to clinics on remote islands of the South Pacific.



Our educational institutions—from Loma Linda University, a pioneer in heart transplants, to tiny mission schools scattered throughout the African interior—have brought millions of young people to a knowledge of a better life in Christ.

We are on the front lines of famine and disaster relief. Local churches worldwide help clothe and feed the poor and homeless at thousands of Adventist Community Services centers.

And even more importantly, groups of Seventh-day Adventist Christians are sharing the message of salvation through a soon-coming Savior in nearly every country on earth.

Could religion, operating through private, individual efforts, have accomplished all this? Of course not. Only an organized group of dedicated Christians could have this kind of worldwide impact.

Christ and the apostles emphasized the need for individual believers to work together.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. . . . The members

should have the same care for one another. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Corinthians 12:21-27).

All parts of the body are not exactly alike, yet every part is 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 if we are trying to work totally on our own. Belonging to a church and being united with 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, but that need can wither away unless given expression. There are a number of ways in which we can worship God, and we are urged to give voice to our deepest admiration:

“Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!” (Psalm 29:2).

“My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Psalm 84:2).

How did the psalmist feel when he thought about going to the place of worship?

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord’” (Psalm 122:1).

What part does music play in public worship?

“Serve the Lord with gladness; come before His presence with singing” (Psalm 100:2).

“Praise God in His sanctuary. . . . Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the lute and harp! . . . Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! . . . Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:1-6).

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

“Give to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts. Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 96:8, 9).

Prayer is also a vital aspect of public worship.

“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; 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 (Acts 2), the book of Acts reveals the fundamental role the Word of God played in the services and faith-sharing activities of the early church. From the time of the Protestant reformers to our day, every great religious revival has been based on biblical preaching. Why?

“The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

One of the positive benefits of regular church attendance is that we learn more of God’s truth as we hear His Word being preached and discussed.

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Romans 10:17).

6 | What's Right With the Church

Some people say they don't attend church because it is full of imperfect people. It's certainly true that there are imperfect people in the church. The church is not a display case for the righteous; it's a hospital for sinners.

In one of His parables, Jesus reminded us that weeds grow among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). Someone has suggested that the church should be called the Society of the Forgiven and the Forgiving.

When we read the New Testament, we discover that the early church had critical problems; and the church today often has serious defects. Sometimes we come to church expecting to be fed with the Word of God, only to go away hungry. Sometimes pastors let us down or fellow church members don't practice what they preach. Some churches have grown unfriendly and unwelcoming.

It's not always easy to look past these failures and see Christ's original intent for His church. Sometimes we feel like just walking away from the problems, but remember, no matter what faults a church may have, Jesus Christ remains the great Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Let's focus on Him and His love. The Bible advises us to keep "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). He will never fail us, and His church will never cease to be a place of worship where sinners can find God. Jacob said of the place where he found God:

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Genesis 28:16, 17).

Christ is both the Foundation and Head of the church, and its Savior and Lord. Despite its faults, the church belongs to Him.

Those who come inside and focus on Christ will see His glory and the power of salvation. They will have the joy of the Lord and the joy of shared fellowship with believers.

“Christ . . . loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

The church is so important to Jesus that He “gave Himself for her” when He died for each of us individually and the church collectively. Therefore, church membership should be important to you. What about your relationship to the church? 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, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 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 wills to do His [God’s] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” (John 7:17).

When we make a commitment to do God’s will, He will help us see whether the teachings of a church are from God, or just human tradition. The key ingredient when finding a church is examining its respect for and allegiance to the Word of God.

Continued on page 16

WordSearch

If you want to go deeper into this study topic, complete this section.

1. How actively involved is Jesus in His church?

(Revelation 1:12, 13, 20)

2. What illustration does the Apostle Paul use to point out the importance of every member of the church and the need for individual believers to work together? (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

3. With so many voices claiming to be right, how can we find a church that holds to God's truth today? (2 Timothy 3:15, 16)

4. What great commission has Jesus given to His church?

(Matthew 28:19, 20)

5. What invitation does Jesus personally extend to you?

(Revelation 3:20)



Genuine fellowship is built around Scripture, not just around a charismatic leader or great institution. Before choosing a church to join, it is important to understand several subjects that we will discuss in upcoming *Discover* Guides. The guides that follow will give some

guiding principles for making the right choice when selecting a church. Guide 26 will deal specifically with this subject.

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

My Decision

- I want to be a part of God's true church and experience the joy and fellowship of worshipping Him with my Christian brothers and sisters.

My Prayer

Dear Father in heaven, I will always be grateful that I received the good news about Jesus. Right now, I want to become a part of the great movement of believers who are proclaiming Your love. Make me an effective witness in and through Your church. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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