

The Seven Pillars of Christian Growth

Part 7 – The Sixth Pillar – Being the Church

ILLUS – A man was marooned on an uninhabited island. 25 years later, he was rescued, but the rescuer noticed that there were three huts. “What’s that one for?” he asked. “That’s where I live.” “What’s that next one for?” he asked. “That’s where I go to church.” “And what’s the third one for?” he asked. “That’s where I used to go to church.”

We are continuing in our series on The Seven Pillars of Christian Growth.

First pillar – God’s Word

Second pillar – Serving

Third pillar – Evangelism

Fourth pillar – Worship

Fifth pillar – Giving

Today, we’re looking at the sixth pillar of Christian growth, and I’ve hummed and ha-ed about what to call my message.

And the reason for that is that people often have so many non-Biblical misconceptions that I have to make sure that I don’t let people walk out of the service with those same misconceptions reinforced by what I say.

I was going to call it Fellowship, but that’s inadequate.

People say, “I got a bit of fellowship a few weeks ago.”

As if fellowship is some kind of jab in the arm you get from a spiritual doctor.

You won’t find that idea in the Bible.

Fellowship is all about relationship.

Many Christians attend church services, but don’t really fellowship, because they don’t build relationships with other believers.

Church attendance is only then beginning of fellowship.

I was going to call it Church.

But people say, “What a beautiful church”, when it’s not a church at all. It’s just a building.

Christians reinforce this idea when we say, “I go to church.”

But you won’t find that phrase in the Bible, because it’s a concept that’s totally foreign to Scripture.

Church is not something we go to; that’s a Sunday service.

But church is a lot bigger than a Sunday service; we **are** the church.

ILLUS – I was talking to another pastor recently, and asked him what his definition of a church was. He said, “Where two or three are gathered in My name ...”

But when Jesus said this, He wasn’t defining the church, He was promising His presence when any group of believers gather.

So I’ve entitled my message: The Sixth Pillar – Being The Church

Eph 1:22-23 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, (23) which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

We are Christ's body, and this idea is developed more fully in 1 Cor 12.

There are a number of pictures used in the New Testament to illustrate what it means to be the church.

But I want to begin by looking at what this concept of the body teaches us.

1. All the members of the body are closely related to one another.

My thumb can't just say, "I don't like the way the eye is looking at me. I'm outta here."

What happens if you separate the thumb from the rest of the body? It dies.

This tells us how important it is to be a functioning part of the church.

Unfortunately, I've spoken to hundreds of believers over the years about the importance of being a part of the church.

And I've discovered that unless something takes place in their hearts, you can't convince them.

But here's what the Bible teaches on this subject of regular involvement.

Heb 10:25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together (the corporate gathering), as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

2 Tim 2:3 You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

We are soldiers in God's army, but soldiers don't just act by themselves.

I've never heard of a country being attacked by one soldier.

Because to be effective, a soldier needs to be part of an army.

Ps 92:13 Those who are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God.

1 Pet 2:5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

God's plan and purpose does not centre primarily on individuals, as difficult as that might be for us to accept.

God's plan is for a people.

Many members can accomplish collectively what the same numbers cannot do individually.

Here's the definition of an aeroplane: A machine that consists of 100% non-flying parts.

Altogether, those parts can achieve something far greater than they can separately; they can fly.

John 10:11-12 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. (12) But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.

There's safety with the rest of the flock.

ILLUS – Commenting on the fact that flamingos survive because they are part of the flock, "Be an individual, step out of the flock, and life could be over very quickly".¹

As they say: How do you eat a banana? First, you separate it from the rest of the bunch.

1 Pet 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

For a predator, the easiest animal to catch and kill is the loner.

2. Some parts of the body are multipurpose, some aren't.

ILLUS – The tongue is used for tasting, talking and chewing.

You'll get people in the church that can do a number of things well, whereas some are limited in what they can do.

Don't ever get discouraged, or worry about what you can or can't do.

God has made each one of us with His purpose in mind.

Just be faithful with what He's given you to do.

2 Cor 10:12 For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

It's foolish to make comparisons, because only God knows the inside story, only God knows His perfect plan and purpose.

ILLUS – There's no point in my heart saying, "It's not fair. All I ever get to do is pump. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Day in, day out. All I want to do is be a tongue. Taste all that good food."

- I don't need two tongues – I have enough trouble with one.
- But I do need a heart.
- And even though my tongue is multipurpose, if I had a choice between losing my tongue and losing my heart, I know which one I'd choose.

ILLUS – What's the point in the hands saying, "It's not fair. How come the mouth gets to do all the eating? How come I never get to taste any food?" Who benefits when the mouth eats? Is it just the mouth?

ILLUS – Or what's the point in the big toe saying, "How come the eyes get to see everything? And I don't get to see nothin' stuck here in a shoe all day?" Who benefits when the eyes see? Is it just the eyes? Of course not, everyone benefits, and especially the big toe, because if the eyes are doing their job, it doesn't get stubbed.

3. You can't tell how important a member of the body is, by outward appearances.

ILLUS – Did you know there are parts of your body at opposite ends that basically keep balance.

One is your inner ear; who can tell me what the other one is?

It's your big toes.

There they are, they don't seem like they do much, but they're very important.

They help you to balance.

1 Sam 16:7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

You can't tell by looking at someone how important they are in God's scheme.

A toe doesn't look much, but it's there for a reason.

4. The whole body works together.

ILLUS – Eyes see food, hands get it, the mouth chews it, the peristaltic motion of your oesophagus is for swallowing, then your stomach and intestines digest it, etc. All of these have to work together for a common purpose.

Any failure by any of these parts and you have problems.

But that's what happens in the body of Christ.

What we know is that 70% plus of all the people who ever become inactive in their Christian life do so within the first 6-12 months after making their initial Christian commitment.²

Everybody has a ministry – no matter how unimportant it might seem to you, it's important to God, and important for the body.

Eph 4:11-12 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, (12) for the equipping of the saints **for the work of ministry**, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

Important Characteristics Of The Church

1. The church is a family.

We're an army, a building, a body, a flock – but more than anything, we're family, with God Himself as the Father.

What that means is that we're all brothers and sisters.

ILLUS – I'm not one of these people who believes in referring to people as brother and sister. “How are you brother? We'll just ask sister Joan to come up now.” Why would you do that? I don't talk to my brother in the flesh and say, “Hello, brother Gareth.” How ridiculous is that?

But brothers and sisters have common family characteristics.

And spiritually, true Christians are a lot alike.

That's how Jesus could say, Luke 6:44 “For every tree is known by its own fruit...”

He was expecting God's children to bear the family resemblance, and be recognisable because of that fruit.

Which brings me to the second characteristic of the church.

Question: What is the life-blood of the church? What is it that really makes the church strong and healthy?

Eph 4:15-16 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head; Christ; (16) from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

More than anything else, the one distinguishing feature of the church is meant to be love.

John 13:35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

All the writers of the New Testament knew this.

In Mat 22:37-40 Jesus said that the first and great commandment was to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And the second commandment is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

Jesus said, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Mark records the same thing. (Mark 12:29-31)

In Luke, Jesus says to “love your enemies”. (Luke 6:35)

John 15:12-13 This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (13) Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

Rom 13:9-10 For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (10) Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

Heb 10:24 ... stir up love and good works.

James calls love “the royal law” (James 2:8)

Peter says “... love one another fervently with a pure heart” (1 Pet 1:22)

Jude says, “keep yourselves in the love of God” ... (Jude 1:21)

In 1 John, John talks about love in 24 verses, that's over 20% of the letter.

Love is the lifeblood of the church.

So what we have to ask ourselves is: Are we a loving church?

You might say “yes”, and I would agree with you – this is a loving church.

But love is something that can always grow.

1 Thess 3:12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you,

1 Thess 4:10-11 and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; (11) that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you,

Increase what?

1 Thess 4:9 But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;

You can never have too much love in a church.

And might I remind you that this does not only apply to Sunday services – that's not church, it's just the corporate expression of the church.

¹ Narrator on documentary series Massive Nature

² Bob Orr