

Stages of Growth

Whenever two or more people join together in a relationship, they go through a process of adapting to one another. In fact, there are distinct stages as our relationships grow and change. When we come to Christ, our relationship with him and with the Church will also progress through these stages. The Church is the Bride of Christ, and Christ is the Groom. As you might suspect, such a metaphor suggests our relationship with Christ cannot be separated from our relationship to the Church. Our union with Christ produces a union with the Church. The Church is God's designated means of growing to full maturity in Christ; our love for Christ is spoken through our love for his Church, and his love for us is received through the loving care of the Church. We cannot say that we love God and yet hate our brother (1Jn 4:20).

And so we're going to look specifically at the relationship between believers in the local church, and the local church's outreach to the elect who are still in the world. To do that, we'll expand on this biblical metaphor of marriage (Eph. 5:24-32).¹ We'll explore the relationship of a young couple who meet, get married, have children, and work together on the family farm (Lk 9:62). Although this metaphor isn't perfect, it should provide an adequate vehicle to study the process and examine the stages. Perhaps we can draw some conclusions about how we ought to become properly "engaged" in the kingdom.

Getting Introduced – *The Dating Game*

How do we meet our future spouse? We may have heard about each other through a mutual friend. Christianity usually has a reputation, whether good or bad). They are introduced intentionally (through the work of an evangelist or outreach team), or they may discover each other by accident (they overhear someone's conversation, or perhaps listen to a sermon on the radio or TV). There may be a matchmaker (someone who invites them to attend their church). They may have responded to an ad in the Personals Column (the Church sends out flyers, puts up billboards, holds a rally or crusade, invites people to a get-acquainted meal, etc.). However they meet, a process of mutual discovery begins. There is either a mutual attraction between them or there is not. And that attraction is either based on tangible and realistic expectations, or it is based on a superficial appearance, a façade. Which one it is will determine whether this will be a lasting relationship or not.

Let's say they fall in love and get married (they join the local body of believers and commit their time, money, and gifts to serve the Church). Depending on the vows they

¹ Eph 5:24-25, 32 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. – [Here we see the principles of mutual submission and oversight laid out. We submit to our elders to make their duties a joy \(Heb 13:17\), but they do not lord it over us \(Mt 20:25-26; 2Cor 1:24\). Neither adaptation is an easy one to make. But if we remember that Christ is Head of all, and we mutually submit to him, then we can submit to one another. In other words, we are married to Christ, not to one another – but it is difficult to find the difference.](#)

took, and the promises they made to each other, they either wake up after the honeymoon is over with delight and enthusiasm, or they have this sinking feeling that the person on the other side of the bed is not who they thought it was. If it's the latter, then there will be buyer's remorse, and panic sets in. There is a sense of betrayal. It may take years to come to the realization that the promises made before the marriage were false, that this partner has been cheating on you, that their background is a fabrication, and that they just can't be trusted to do what they say they will do. In the American evangelical church, that's no problem. You either stop going to church altogether and settle for a private religion, or you move to the church down the street to see if you can't get a better partner.

Is that the image of the Church as described in the Bible? Not at all. Our relationship with Christ is bound up in our relationship to the Church, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, whether richer or poorer, till death do us part. This is true because each believer is disciplined in a *public* interactive process, not through a *private* introspective process. We have been called into fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1Cor 1:9; 1Jn 1:3). And yet, if we do not love one another we cannot love God (1Jn 4:1). *These are linked relationships*. And so the believer is invited by Christ to commit to a lifetime of spiritual growth *in the Church*. The Church equips each believer to serve Christ *through the Church*. It's a give and take affair. We are a mutually dependent fellowship of saints. That means we must grow not only in our relationship to one another and to God, but we will also grow *through* our relationships with one another and with God. That's God's design for the Church. We cannot be nourished and grow apart from the Vine, and the Vine is represented on this earth in the Body of Christ, which is his Church.

All of this being said, let's explore each of the stages we pass through as our relationship to one another is established and grows. And then we'll look at how these relationships contribute to growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2Pet 3;18).

Courtship – This is the first stage, the one in which we encounter other believers who share our vision and our experience of the kingdom of God. We want to know if they worship the same God in the same way that we understand him from the Scriptures. We have been searching for a group of like-minded believers, and this is the point at which we hope we have at last been drawn to them. Like any good suitor, we put our best foot forward and try to win their confidence and acceptance, if not their love.² If we have come to the faith through the efforts and instruction of someone in the congregation, there is a slightly different path, almost like having premarital sex. It may create a false bond that takes years to recognize as such. We may be pleasantly surprised to find that our suitor is a faithful provider; but we may also be shocked and dismayed to discover that we have been fed lies, or that we are not being cared for in a loving way – and that is followed shortly by a “divorce”.

The Church, curiously, is the one that more often plays the role of the suitor in this dance, not the believer. This sometimes results in a market-driven Church in which individual is a consumer of religious and social services, and the Church is a full-service outlet for

² In Christian fellowship, we examine one another to find out if we are dealing with true believers. If so, there are no other qualifications of acceptance and love. Christ loves this person, and therefore so do we.

them. This is not God's intent for the Church. We are drawn by God into fellowship with him and with one another. He is our Father, and we are his family. This is not a business transaction. There is no warranty of merchantability, no price-haggling, no test-driving, or sales pressure. Nonetheless, there is an obvious amount of packaging, puffing, and downright false advertising going on. It often leads to misunderstandings about each other's true identity, what we need or want from each other, and whether we can realistically satisfy each other's expectations. Generally this means establishing and accepting what the ground rules will be. We're not buying a product to take home and use for our private benefit. We're not feeding believers a therapeutic Gospel of self-help and psychology. The Church is a limited partnership in which each partner, each *believer*, will enter into a covenantal relationship with all other believers to spread the kingdom of God on earth. The courtship is where the terms of that covenant are established, and the mutual venture is agreed to, whether tacitly or overtly. It is a spiritual affair, not a social gathering. And so we enter into serious negotiations to see if we are well-suited.

Dowry – A question arises as to what the other party brings to the table. What's their contribution to the mutual enterprise? How do they add value to the relationship? This is where initiation rituals usually arise as they test one another. There is always a price of admission, a cost of participation, a demonstration of loyalty, a pledge or down-payment of fidelity to fulfill our promises to one another. This is followed by some dickering as to what that price or qualification should be. A new convert always wants to know how much and how quickly he is going to have to change. How much Bible study will be involved? What's this prayer thing? Can I still have a beer? The new believer wants to know whether the leadership can be trusted to do what they promise: to raise him up in the faith without misleading him or putting him down. Is he just the project of the week, or is he a valued object of the Church's affections?

The Church wants to know how much work this man will take, whether there are sufficient resources to train him. Will he stay? Will he be reliable? Will he work in harmony with the others or in discord? Churches would rather have a successful businessman who has proven relationship skills and who has demonstrated his leadership in the marketplace, than to raise up a bowery bum to that same level of self-confidence. That's because the businessman takes less work, and he provides more rewards in his popularity and in his monetary resources. We forget that Christ "came for the sick, not the healthy." (Mt 9:12) We fall into the trap of looking at the outside, not the heart. The seemingly well-suited businessman may be the greater challenge, because he thinks he's healthy. The bowery bum knows better. And so we must ask ourselves, are there any hidden agendas on either side? We value honesty and faithfulness above all else. It's time to ante up. We need to put our time and money where our mouth is, and commit ourselves to the work of Christ that lies before us. Lip-service is a dead giveaway that this relationship is doomed to failure (Mt 15:8).

Wedding – This is the point at which we sign the covenant agreement. Once the agreement is made (perhaps a membership class), and the vows have been said (the public ceremony acknowledging new members), the celebration begins. It is always short, and usually expensive. We want to seal the deal as quickly as possible before

buyer's regret sets in and either party considers annulment. That's why the groom is never allowed to see the bride on her wedding day. But that's not quite the way it is intended to work in the church. The Groom is Christ, and the Bride is the Church. When we join the local church, though it is *like* a marriage, we are in fact recognizing our calling to that particular church body; we are establishing a relationship between two parties who were "made for each other". It is the Holy Spirit who gifted us and assigned us our "duty station" for this leg of our journey with Christ – which is not at all like a marriage, is it? As with a parable, some things are the same, and some things are different in this metaphor; so don't take this too far. What we can say, though, is that the wedding is the day on which vows are made to one another. What did you vow? What did the church vow? Or as Scripture puts it, what are your mutual obligations toward one another in the church? The church is not an organization, with its own identity. It is an organism in which each component member must do its part or the body suffers (1Cor 12). That is a book all to itself; yet keep that concept of interdependence and community in mind.

Honeymoon – Now that the covenant has been consummated, there is no going back – for the moment. Both parties have committed themselves to one another: (1) the church has committed to nurturing, equipping, and building up its new members, and drawing them into fellowship with the rest of the body; (2) new members have committed to submitting to the authority of Christ in Scripture (spiritual growth), to submitting to the exercise of that authority through the elders (discipline), and to service in the church (evidencing their faith through action). In that sense, they have changed their "economic" positions (with their time and finances); they are now mutually dependent on this thing working out. It is a time of getting to know each other and seeing if the two can not only get along, but prosper together. Do they uplift and encourage one another? Are the two more than the sum of their parts? It is a time for lots of questions, exploration, challenge, and testing. Can I trust the other one? We very tentatively let down the walls, which represents setting aside the cosmetics of courtship. Can the other one really accept me with my faults and weaknesses? Are they willing not only to put up with me, but to invest in me, and help me through this awkwardness? What will my role be? *This is a very brief, and very crucial period of time!* New members must be assimilated quickly! The bonds of this relationship must be sealed before the dawn. They have become lovers in Christ, and through this act they must display their tenderness and affection, their loving care for one another, their forbearance and mutual acceptance, delighting in communicating their needs and having those needs met, quickly and appropriately. This is not the time for petulance and selfishness. This is not the time for making demands. The marriage will prosper or wither, doubts will arise or vanish, based on our actions and our words during the course of this evening. It has portents of things to come. It is the point at which our heart is revealed, and all those intangible promises must be tangibly fulfilled. Were we truthful, or did we lie? *This is the test that the Church must pass.* It stands in Christ's place as the groom. The new member is the passive and anxious bride. She must be passionately wooed until she is overcome with her own passion, and willingly submits. She must be convinced that the groom may be trusted, and will be gentle with her, and will provide for her needs – because he has been observant, and patient, and listened to her as she spoke of her fears, and he has responded in love – as Christ does for us all.

Adjustment – The honeymoon is over and reality is setting in. We discover all those misunderstandings, and now raise all those questions we should have asked beforehand. We begin to recognize and accept that the conditions of our relationship have changed. We are no longer independent, but interdependent. We cannot just do as we please. We have to account for the behavior and pre-existing habits of the other one. There is always more to the deal than we think we agreed to. We can't really cut and run. Now we need to adjust to these new circumstances. We decide to make this work despite the difficulty – at least, that's what we do if we understand the nature of a vow. We realize that we need to change our old patterns. We either commit to change the way we think and behave, or else we live with constant alienation and growing resentment. We either begin to grow, or we settle for disappointment and bitterness. We begin to ask ourselves, "What can I do to make this work? How can I be reconciled with my partner? How can I express my needs in such a way that I will not offend them? In what ways, and to what extent, can I accommodate their needs without erasing my own identity, and without letting my own needs go unmet?" This is a period of long discussions, of dialogue and not monologue, of pursuing understanding and self-sacrifice ahead of getting our own way; of *putting the relationship above the ego*. It's *hard* work. The Bible calls this mutual forbearance. We recognize each other's frailties and weaknesses, and we adapt to them: we strive not to hurt, as we endeavor to strengthen our partner. And we are long-suffering through it all; we are willing to put up with short-term pain for long-term gain. We are still seeking to persuade new members of the *need* to commit, without actually asking for commitment. This is a period of exploration and uncovering ourselves. This is where transparency has the most value. We let them see us as we are. It begins with a class, or a small group, rather than face to face. But it then leads to that personal invitation to our homes. We sit down to a meal together, and speak more of life, and personal experiences, and vital relationships, than we do of church business or theology. This is where we get to know one another as people, and not just as believers or members.

Commitment – This might also be called '*risky business*'. We're going to put our money where our mouth is. It is equivalent to owning a farm; we're going out to buy seed for sowing. It's going to cost us. It's demonstrating that we're willing to give up something in order to get what we want in the form of a harvest. Usually what people want is stability and security in its various forms. They are hoping to invest, and not just to buy. They're hoping to get a return on their investment. "What do I get out of it?" And that's not a wrong motivation at all. If I join a church, I have expectations. I expect to be taught sound doctrine. I expect to see examples of Christ-like living. I expect to be equipped with everything I need to grow and mature in Christ. The Church has expectations too. It expects financial support to pay its bills, and ensure that the teaching elders have the time they need to study and prepare by giving them an adequate income. It expects that the membership will apply what it is taught, that the Christian walk is not a matter of words but of power. It expects submission to the Word of God, and a servant's heart. None of these things, on either side, is unreasonable or unattainable. Too often in life we go into debt without agreeing to the cost, and without pre-determining what the return should be. We are blindly and foolishly committed, not intentionally and wisely committed. That must not happen in the Church.

Sowing - Long hours, late nights, and hard work. The field must be prepared before the seed can be sown. This is where we need teamwork. There has to be a division of labor. There is too much to be done, so that it cannot be done alone. That's God's design and his intent for the members of the church. The mutually dependent communion of saints requires a distribution of gifts and resources, which the Holy Spirit has provided for among us (Heb 2:4). In our metaphor, the neighbors and friends come over to help. Someone needs to sharpen the tools. Someone needs to provide support – the food, refreshment, and encouragement. There is planning, implementation, and oversight. This is where the elders earn their keep. The neighbors aren't going to come, and the work isn't going to be done, until someone calls them together and gives them the game-plan. Everyone must be considered in the context of the work that must be done. We need to know one another well-enough that we properly allocate each portion of the workload to those best suited to accomplish it. And when we do what we are best at, we are willing to do it with delight and enthusiasm. Churches fail when they keep dumping the workload on the same people, regardless of their availability and giftedness. The Church is not an end in itself. This is the second major cause of failing churches. The chores, the purpose and function of the church, are not meant to *perpetuate* the church as an institution, but to *grow and mature* the church as the Body of Christ. That means discipling for purposes of evangelizing, and evangelizing for purposes of discipling. As we mature in Christ by growing spiritually, we reach out with the Gospel, and with our gospel witness (that is, our community service), which grows the Church numerically. We then disciple the newcomers, and continue our outreach through their personal sphere of influence (that is, by reaching out to their family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers). That's a scary proposition for most new Christians. The church reaches out through evangelists and through the proclamation of the gospel to a non-descript audience (non-acquaintances). From these we have face to face encounters with new believers. Usually we draw only two or three individuals or families this way (Paul met Lydia and the jailer in Thyatira, and founded a church through them). We then raise them up in the faith, and send them back into their own community to spread the seed of the gospel. THIS is what produces 100, 60, 30 times what was sown (Mat 13:8). Our people need to be equipped, trained, to do this work. THAT is what the church exists for. We instruct the sowers. And then we gather together to worship and praise God for his workmanship.

Waiting – This is where hope comes in, expectations rise, and dependence is exercised. We can't make it rain. We can't control the outcome either in the size of the crop or the quality of the fruit. We don't control the pests and the thieves who want to steal our seed, or our vision of what might come of our labors. We do what we can to keep out meddlers and naysayers, but in the end, only God will determine what grows, where it grows, and how abundant it will be. This is not the same as resignation or fatalism. We did the work. We know the possibilities. Everything that we could do, we did. We are confident of the outcome even if we are not in control of it. *It will come in its due season*. Don't disturb the soil trying to see if it's growing. Just keep feeding and watering, feeding and watering. We commit ourselves to the *process*, not to the outcome – because we live by faith and not by sight (2Cor 5:7). We *work* through the process, but we *pray* for the outcome. We are responsible for the work; God is responsible for the outcome.

Reaping – Payday has arrived. The harvest is ready. There is work to be done. There is too much for us to do again. We call the neighbors, friends, and the whole family to get into the field and get the crop in before it is lost. There is a time factor. We've got to get it under the roof of the barn before it rots in the field. We need to pick it just as it ripens, so it has all of its fullness and flavor. Speed is of the essence. We need to watch for the day. We roam the fields daily looking for new produce, and we inspect the fruit daily to see if it is growing healthy and strong. We're not just talking about conversion here. We're also talking about sanctification, and the fruit of the Spirit. We have people that we talk to about Christ over an extended period of time. We sow seeds into their lives by our words, our attitude, our testimony, and our actions towards them. At some point, that seed takes root, and these people need to be called to come to Christ, and not perpetually evangelized because we fear asking that awkward question that may damage our friendship. So we ask them, "Is there anything that is keeping you from coming to Christ right now?" And then *listen!* Don't rebut, refute, or correct them. If they ask questions, then give straight-forward simple answers, not going beyond what has been asked. Then ask again, "Is there anything else that keeps you from coming to Christ right now?" If the questions keep coming, it takes discernment to know whether this person is throwing up hasty obstacles, or whether the questions are being asked with all sincerity. Always answer sincere questions. Never waste time answering excuses. The same applies to looking at fruit within the family of God. We are fruit-inspectors, and we need to be busy every day, first in front of the mirror, and then wandering the crop in the church. Is this person ready for further instruction? Has that person fallen off the path? Does this one need clarification? Does that one need encouragement, or rebuke? Discernment means giving each one what *they* need to grow, not what *we* need to feel superior (Mt 7:5). Do *they* want it, or is it only that *you* want it for them? Two very different things are needed depending on the answer to that question. Ask; probe; inspect – *before* you speak or act.

Payback – Now we get what we have worked so hard for to market. We want the biggest return we can get for what have invested in. Why? Because we need to return what we borrowed (seed) to get the results we were after. We need to acknowledge God's ownership of the entire crop. So, in order, (1) we tithe in acknowledgment, setting aside a portion for the poor; (2) we set aside what we need to live on; (3) we gather seed for next year's crop; (4) we put the remainder of the crop, the largest share, into the marketplace to yield our profit. That is, we planted the seed with which we were entrusted (the gospel); we grew its crop to maturity (sanctification); we waited for the fruit to appear (of the Spirit); we harvested that fruit (put them to work); we separated the wheat from the tares (those whose lives reflect the love of Christ from those which do not); we separated fruit from chaff (character from mere activity); we processed the wheat (assigned each to his proper duties); we kept some of the seed to plant new crops next season (identified the evangelists and those who have been working in their spheres of influence); we ground the rest (in sacrificial service); then we baked enough bread for today (we preached the Gospel, *as lived out in the lives of the congregation*). And this was our profit from our labors. We honor individual members, lifting them up as living examples to the others. And if God is gracious, we may have enough left over for savings, and perhaps rewards. It's OK to enjoy the fruit of our labor, to have a season of rest and pleasure as we celebrate the harvest together.

Retirement – This isn't putting an end to the growth. It is simply drawing back from the intensity of it all. It is summertime. Enjoy it. You may retire just before you begin a whole new endeavor. Maybe there is no longer the zeal for what you're currently doing. A desire for change begins to build in your heart. The mortgage you took out for this stage of your life has been paid, and you're looking for a new home. It may just be a short-term vacation at a resort – travel and a chance to explore new possibilities; a sabbatical. But the work of the Church never ends. Next season's crop is waiting to be planted. Maybe this year we'll plant something new. Maybe we'll let this field lie fallow so it can be replenished. Individually, we have those same needs for replenishment. It's OK to take time to regain our vigor and enthusiasm. The elders need to swap off the assigned chores from the old-timers to the new-comers; change their duties. I guarantee the gifts of these long-term servants have grown, and so has their capacity for service. They are stronger now. Don't let them stagnate by keeping them doing the same thing over and over. Set new goals; establish new ways of doing things within the bounds of Scripture. Redecorate the building as well as the lives of the saints. Take time to consider the course that the church is on. Are we closer to our goals or further away? We can't do that if we are constantly distracted by the day to day activities of running the church. And so we need to take time to meditate, ponder, and regain our vision. Soil needs to be turned before new seed can be planted. It has become hard and trampled down. So too with the lives of the saints. Keep them lively and vibrant by avoiding ritual and routine. They'll work harder, and with more enthusiasm, if they catch the vision anew.

Conclusion

That concludes our little exploration of life in the church, considering it like a marriage, and like working the family farm together. I hope, at least, that it has provided a slightly different perspective on what, how, why, and when we do what we do. The relationship must drive the activities, and not the other way around. The activities are just vehicles to enhance our relationships in the Church and with Christ, and to accomplish the work which God has set before us. We are related to one another through Christ, and because of Christ. Let us be diligent to do what is required in each step of that relationship, and during each season of our time together. **Remember:** Marriage is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end (to produce godly offspring). Owning a farm is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end (to grow food to sustain our life). And in the same way, *the Church is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end* (to equip us for the work of ministry, in order to build up the Body of Christ – Eph 4:12).