

Dear Friend,

Shortly after I came to faith in Christ I was introduced to a student Christian group called Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) at UW-Stevens Point where I was a junior. It was near the end of the year and so I was only able to attend a couple of meetings. However, I did find out about a Wed. night Bible study that was to be held that summer for students who were remaining in Stevens Point, which I was going to do. That Bible study was my first experience in developing friendships with other people simply because we all had faith in Jesus. We met for study each week; we went on bike rides and picnics together. We stayed up late at each other's apartments talking about the Bible. We went to church together. A couple of the guys I worked with that summer professed faith in Christ and got involved in our little Bible study. One of them was the best man at my wedding a year later.

My experience that summer motivated me in the fall, as classes resumed, to get more involved with CCC. Again I enjoyed meeting and developing relationships with a whole new group of people with whom I was related only because of our common faith. I developed friendships during the next two years that have lasted for over 30 years. I'll never forget the first time my good friend Dale told me that he loved me. We were coming back from a Bible study and as I walked into my dorm and he was halfway to his dorm he yelled out, "I love you, brother." It felt really weird to have another guy say such a thing to me (especially so loudly) and yet it also felt right that, as brothers in Christ, we express that kind of affection for each other.

It was one of the things that most surprised me after I became a Christian, how much I enjoyed knowing and relating to other Christians with whom I shared little in common, except that we were Christians. It struck me as unusual that I could join a group of strangers and in such a very short period of time feel like I'd known these people my whole life. Yet, as I've understood the Scriptures better I've discovered that this is exactly what Jesus and the apostles expected to happen when people were given new hearts that trusted in Christ.

Consider these few statements from the NT: "By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Jesus says that the primary evidence that we are Christians is that we love one another. "Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, mentioning you in my prayers" (Ephesians 1:15). There are two evidences that indicate to Paul that these people have truly been born again. They trust in Jesus and they love other Christians. The fact that he thanks God for these two facts shows that he believes God is the ultimate cause of both. In other words, when God saves a person they inevitably trust Jesus and love Christians. Finally, we hear this from the apostle John, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God" (1 John 4:7). John uses the metaphor of physical birth to describe spiritual birth. Every person who has been born physically gives evidence that they possess physical life: they eat, speak, move, express emotion, see, etc. In the same way, everyone who has been given spiritual birth by God loves other Christians because love for

other Christians comes from God. This is why John can so emphatically declare a few verses later (4:20) that if you don't love other Christians you have not been born of God.

It is because of the Scriptures overwhelming emphasis that one of the chief evidences of a work of the Holy Spirit in an individual and in a church is the delight we have in loving one another that the second "value" we have as a church is this: "We believe that loving relationships should permeate every aspect of a Christ follower's life. We aim for people to find friends and feel at home in our church." As love for Christians is an "effect" of spiritual birth we know that the way you become a loving person or a loving church is through God giving his life by his Spirit, through his word. We never want to lose sight of the fact that flowing from true conversion is a heart that delights to love other believers. We earnestly pray that God would have mercy upon us personally and corporately, that we might be a church where we are growing to love one another as an expression of that divine life that has been planted in us through the Word, by the Spirit. It is in this way that we will display the greatness of God.

Hoping to love you more,