

NURTURING AND DISCIPLING NEW CONVERTS

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Someone may ask, "Why should a congress on world evangelization devote time to considering the nurture of believers?" We must remember that our consideration of strategy, methods, and priorities relating to world evangelization will be incomplete if we do not give some attention to the question of discipling converts and establishing churches.

Discovering the basis

In the *biblical pattern of evangelism*, bringing people to a decision for Christ is not the end. When our Lord called the twelve disciples, "He appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:14-15). He did not stop with the proclamation of the kingdom of God or with leading people to choose the kingdom. He made disciples. In his Great Commission, Jesus said, "Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). He did not say, "Go and preach" but "Go and disciple." In the following verse he points out how they have to do it, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).

Paul did not stop with mere proclamation of the Gospel or with leading people to faith in Christ. Wherever he went, he established local churches which became nerve centers of evangelism. His method is summarized in Acts 14:21-23. He and Barnabas preached the Gospel, made many disciples, visited them again, strengthened them and exhorted them, gave them the right leaders for the church, and left them in the hands of the Lord. In Ephesus, Paul preached in the synagogue for three months regularly, then gathered the disciples and taught them daily in the school hall of Tyrannus for two years. As a result, the Gospel spread all over the province of Asia (Acts 19:8-10).

In I John 1:3, John writes about the proclamation of Christ, "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." The purpose of the proclamation is that they may have fellowship. Individual conversion is not the ultimate goal of New Testament evangelism. It is the bringing of the converted ones into fellowship with each other and with God: It was in this fellowship that nurturing and discipling of new converts took place. This biblical pattern is contrary to the excessive individualism that is often seen in our evangelism today.

Discerning the need

First, we note that nurturing and discipling are needed *to conserve the fruits of evangelism*. The Achilles heel of modern mass evangelism is the follow-up. Often hundreds of people respond to the invitation and make a personal decision in a mass evangelistic meeting. There are very few of these who really follow on to become disciples and effective witnesses. There are many drop-outs in spite of our best follow-up methods and literature. The reason is often because the church shares no responsibility in the follow-up program. Nurturing and discipling of new converts is the work of the church, and should not be pushed on to any other agency.

A new believer is often very alert and eager to learn new spiritual truths and take fresh steps of obedience. He is eager to listen to any teaching that supposedly comes from the Bible. This is what makes him a target for false teachings and false cults. If he is not nurtured in the truth and if his soul is not satisfied with the right kind of spiritual food, his hunger may be misdirected.

Second, nurturing is very essential in order *to make strong, balanced witnessing Christians* out of new believers. A promising new convert is sometimes tragically led into some by-path by the devil, and he becomes lopsided in his Christian life and witness. He emphasizes that which should be peripheral and neglects that which should be central. The reason is a lack of balanced Bible teaching. Or, he may go on living a fruitless, self-complacent life which lacks warmth and involvement. This is because as a Christian he is not taught what his privileges, responsibilities, and resources are. What a tragedy to see a number of Christians who meet week after week in some wonderful fellowship sing choruses, listen to sermons, and go about totally indifferent to the needs of their fellowmen around them, and never making any impact on them!

Defining the goals

What is our goal in nurturing new converts? Paul writes, "His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12). The aim of nurturing is not to go on endlessly teaching the new convert so that he is always at the receiving end. He must take his place along with other believers in building the body of Christ. He must become a mature Christian, mature in love, taking his part in the corporate growth of the body of Christ. He also becomes stable in his faith, not carried away by every "wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:13-16).

There is a threefold growth which we look for in those whom we nurture and disciple. First, there must be *maturity in love*. Second, there must be *soundness of doctrine*. Third, they must be *involved in building up the church*. Christian behavior, Christian belief, and Christian service must go together. Growth must be manifested in all these three realms.

In a world that is so mixed up in its standards and values, the new believer must stand true to the standards and values of the kingdom of God. True, the miracle of new birth alters his basic attitudes and changes the direction of his life. But the constant teaching of the Word of God is

necessary to establish him in the kingdom's way of life. A young Christian mentioned in a conference how he was tempted constantly in his work to accept the gifts that people forced upon him when he helped them in the normal course of his duty. All around him everyone including his co-workers and superiors accepted such gifts without any disturbance of conscience. But as he became grounded in God's Word he clearly saw that this was wrong. Christian behavior is the product of Christian nurture and discipleship.

The Christians in Asia are often caught between the crosscurrents of non-Christian philosophies and ideologies. Most of the resurgent non-Christian religions have a political appeal. To be a Christian is considered to be anti-national and unpatriotic. Subtle pulls for compromise have silenced many a witnessing voice. The increasing number of god-men with their numerous followers from the West have much popular appeal in India. Their teachings are very subtle, counterfeiting Christian teachings on many points. Added to this is the theological confusion within Christendom. In such a situation Christian belief must be clearly defined and established. The new convert must know where to turn for the authority of his faith, and he must know how to submit to that authority.

It is not enough to have the correct Christian behavior and be established in the right Christian doctrine. The new believers must also be involved in Christian service as a member of the body of Christ. In churches where there is a faithful teaching of Scripture, the believers are faithful in their stewardship of money, in their witnessing, and in their service. Sometimes we withhold the whole counsel of God, fearing lest we lay unnecessary burdens on new believers. But let us not forget the command of our Lord to "teach them to observe all" that he has commanded us.

Even after many years of their existence, there are still many churches in Asia which are not financially self-supporting. The reason is that the believers in the early days had not been taught to give according to the biblical pattern. In the same way, missionary vision and concern is very much lacking in many of the churches. The biblical understanding of missions has not been given to the believers and they are not aware of their responsibility for world evangelization. This vital failure in the nurture of the early converts has led to years and years of stagnant, nominal Christianity in many parts of Asia.

Determining the methods

The question now is, "How to nurture and disciple the new converts so as to meet the need we have outlined and fulfill the goal we have laid down?" In any local church, the first means one can think of for nurture is the *pulpit ministry*. In the listing of the various gifts for the building up of the church, Paul mentions the pastor and the teacher together in Eph. 4:11. The pastoral ministry and the teaching ministry are two sides of the same coin. The pastor is also the teacher. No faithful shepherd of his flock can abdicate his responsibility to feed them. What a privilege it is to stand Sunday after Sunday before his congregation and to teach them the riches of God's Word! There is no substitute for this. This task must have the top priority in the ministry of a pastor.

Such a systematic teaching of his congregation through the pulpit will demand the best of his gifts and time and effort. He who is willing to invest these freely will reap his reward with great joy. The sermons must be planned so that there is order and continuity. They must be biblical, practical, and relevant. As far as possible, the pastor must occupy his own pulpit every Sunday. Informal discussion times can be planned to clarify or discuss the issues raised by the sermon.

Weekly adult Bible classes can also be used for systematic teaching. These can be held in the church. Younger adults can be in one group and the older ones in another group so that there is more freedom in sharing and discussion. These groups should not be very large. Interaction and give-and-take in personal relationships are important in this teaching situation. New converts feel neglected in the impersonal atmosphere of a large church. So it is necessary that they get the care and personal attention they need in these small groups.

These Bible study groups must be informal. Open, frank discussions must be encouraged. Any honest question must be allowed and the answer found in the group. There must be intimate, transparent fellowship between the one who teaches and those who are taught. Not all the teaching is done by words alone. The responses and the reactions of the one who is the teacher to various situations make a deep impression on the new believer. The teacher must be willing to expose himself and his responses to the scrutiny of those whom he is discipling. Discipling cannot be done from a distance. If we build a *wall* around ourselves, we cannot effectively make disciples. There is a costly self-giving in discipling. Paul wrote, "We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves" (I Thess. 2:8). Writing to the Corinthians, he said, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (II Cor. 12:15).

There are two other situations besides the church where discipling can take place. Small *Bible study groups in homes* can be greatly used to nurture the new believers. The advantage in this is that the whole family can sit together with the Word of God and study it. This is bound to affect their life in the home and their family relationships. Several families in an area can join together and meet regularly to study the Word of God. Such home Bible study groups should be linked with the local church. The local church can provide trained lay men and women to lead these groups. Home Bible study groups are often recommended as very effective means of evangelism. They can also be used for nurturing and discipling new believers.

The *place of business* can also be used to nurture and disciple new believers. A Christian in industry or in business will have several people working with him. That becomes *his* sphere of witnessing and discipling. Not only are his words important but even his attitudes, his reactions and his actions speak aloud. What a wonderful opportunity to lead men into the faith and then to build them up in the faith! When a new believer sees discipleship demonstrated to him right in front of his eyes in his factory or in his business, the impact is strong. Moreover, this impact does not come from the pulpit from a paid teacher, but from one who like himself is in industry or in business to earn his bread.

A believing teacher with a passion to obey the Lord's Great Commission may make disciples in a few years among his pupils and his fellow-teachers. A believing factory worker or office worker may do the same among his colleagues. These believers are then linked to the local church so that they grow together with the rest of the body of Christ.

Distributing the responsibility

The best place for nurturing and discipling the new convert is the local church. It is often thought that if a new believer is sent to a Bible school or seminary where the Scriptures and doctrine are taught, he will become strong in the faith and grow in his Christian life. This is a mistaken notion. The Bible school is not the place to nurture a new convert. I have known a young man, a convert from a non-Christian faith, who came into a Bible school immediately after his conversion and ended up as a miserable failure in his Christian life. He was made much of and regarded as a showcase sample. Very soon he became the favorite of a few teachers in the school and instead of learning to walk in the light, he fell a prey to deception and sin.

It is also wrong to isolate the new convert in an artificial environment such as that of a mission compound. Well-meaning and undiscerning missionaries have taken converts from non-Christian faiths under their wings, pampered them with a paternal attitude, and spoiled them for Christ and his church. The place of nurture is not the mission compound, it is the local church. It is in fellowship that the new convert is disciplined, not in isolation.

Personal attention to each individual is important. About his own ministry of teaching and nurturing, Paul says that he was "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom" (Col. 1:28). To the Thessalonian believers, he writes, "Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you" (I Thess. 2:11). However, care must be taken that the new believers do not depend completely on the one who disciplines them. Oswald Chambers points out that when a man becomes a necessity to a soul, he has got out of God's order.

In every church there must be many *disciple-makers*. The pastor alone cannot nurture and disciple the new converts. There must be *trained men and women* who can take the responsibility for the small Bible study groups or "discipling groups," and the *entire congregation* must be trained to share responsibility and to give Christian fellowship. Even *new converts* who have had some training and experience in their Christian life and faith can be put to work in this way. They can be made responsible to nurture others. In nurturing others, they themselves will learn to take their problems to the Lord and look for the answers. In this way they will also grow. In one church the pastor has organized a small group known as "The Great Commission Corps" — a few hand-picked lay people who have given themselves to the ministry of teaching and nurturing others. Their usual program is study of the Word, prayer, and sharing of experiences, problems, and encouragements. To this select group the pastor imparts the very best of his knowledge and experience, and they in turn go out to disciple others.

What a high calling is ours — the call to disciple men and women to love and serve our Lord! God's Word says, "Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church" (I Cor. 14:12).