The New Christian Needs Help

By Richard W. Bailey

Within two years of their professed conversion over 50 percent of new converts cannot be found in church on a given Sunday.

Is the church guilty of failing to spend time in following up the individuals it wins to Christ? We must do more than just advise new believers to pray every day, read their Bible and be sure to tell someone else what the Lord has done for them.

New Testament follow-up is attending to new converts until they are "mature in Christ." Maturity takes time, training, experience and patience. Paul spent a great percentage of his time in follow-up. He said to Barnabas, "Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do" (Acts 15:36). After Paul preached the gospel in Derbe he returned to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch "confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith" (Acts 14:22). Every epistle of Paul is really a follow-up letter.

Basic principles of follow-up are evident in the New Testament. At least four of these are (1) guardianship, (2) fellowship, (3) discipleship and (4) apprenticeship.

Guardianship

Whatever strategy is adopted for follow-up ministry, to be effective it must include personal guardianship. If Jesus found it necessary to spend time almost constantly with His disciples before He commissioned them to preach, we may be sure there is no shortcut to Christian growth. As a newborn infant needs someone to supply personal love, provision of immediate needs and protection from harm, so does the newborn convert.

Man's need for love is universal. It is a fact that babies who do not receive personal love in the first year of life may actually die or develop abnormal personality traits. Similarly there is no substitute for personal contact with the new convert. You should make at least three visits to the new Christian during the first week. Develop a sense of loyalty and trust with the convert through informal meetings for listening, reading of Scripture and prayer.

The immediate need that led the person to seek Christ must not be overlooked, for it is not necessarily settled by his initial prayer for forgiveness. Begin where he is; offer specific prayer and specific assistance.

Every new Christian faces doubts, questions, temptations. Lead him to repeat the plan of salvation from Scripture as an act of confirmation of his conversion. The Word of God is the remedy for both doubts and temptations, and you can use each occasion of conversation and practical help to share faith and prayer for the spiritual needs of the new convert. Introduce him

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to the reading of his own Bible and lead him into an understanding of the teachings of the New Testament.

Fellowship

God has created all men with a deep need for fellowship and has made a wonderful provision for this need in the "fellowship of the saints." (It is most significant that that word *saints* is never used in the New Testament in the singular.) Such a sharing fellowship should be experienced by the convert in three areas--in the congregation, in a small group and one-on-one.

Christ wants every convert to feel that he is part of His "called-out ones." The glory of the church and its functions for worship and praise, prayer, preaching instruction, participation in the sacraments and social life can so captivate the convert that he will not "forsake the assembly of the saints."

But a person may never feel a real sharing of fellowship in the larger congregation until he is introduced to it in a small group. There is a New Testament pattern of home prayer meetings and Bible studies, and the revival of small group meetings in recent years demonstrates their value in personalizing the ministry of the church. If possible, start a Bible study group in the home of the new Christian. Choose a home Bible study plan that is elementary but not trite, and one that communicates clearly.

The effective small group fellowship will be accepting and inclusive. It will be unshockable and democratic--where people can tell one another their inner problems and in honest, personal sharing know something of "bearing one another's burdens." Perhaps the hardest thing to do is to commit ourselves to another in a true sharing experience, but this kind of association with the convert is vital if we are to be realistic and enable him to identify with us.

Discipleship

Discipleship means being conformed to the image of Christ--believing and practicing His teachings. A new convert must be taught before he can believe and practice, and systematic teaching should be scheduled within the first two years after conversion. This training must include doctrinal beliefs, practical guidelines for the new life, ethical principles to live by and a Christian's responsibility to witness to others.

In addition to teaching him the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, it is imperative to lead the new convert to a personal experience of receiving the Holy Spirit for purity of life and power for service. The Holy Spirit alone makes the Person of Jesus Christ and His victorious life a reality--"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

The new Christian will of course need general instruction in the history of the church and specifically in the work, mission and message of the denomination he intends to be a part of. The gospel of an all-sufficient Jesus is the vital, essential truth he needs for spiritual growth.

The teaching of Christian ethics and conduct must not be neglected. Biblical instruction should cover the practical areas of a person's relation to his money, the Lord's day, marriage,

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business, pleasures and every other area of life.

The goal of follow-up ministry is twofold, to enable the new believer to become a faithful disciple of Christ and a witness to the world. The convert needs to see his responsibility based on the mandate of Scripture to be "witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). The plight of man and the soon return of our sovereign Christ give an urgency to go into all the world and preach the gospel.

Apprenticeship

Christian maturity will ultimately find its expression in evangelism and ministry within the church. Unless a church progresses toward reproducing itself, it becomes turned inward, and in trying to save its life with its own internal program soon loses it. We must ever be confirming the saints in Christ as apprentices, encouraging, training and supervising them so that they will be prepared to go into all the world and preach the gospel of Christ.

Much good material has been developed for the training of workers in both personal and collective evangelism. But training will never suffice without supervision. It would be suicidal to give lessons from a textbook in the art of swimming and then take a student to the water and expect him to swim. Big business spends millions of dollars each year for skilled men who give their time only to supervision. Jesus may have had this principle in mind when He sent His disciples out by twos. It is not difficult for me to believe that one supervised the other.

Every Christian is born to reproduce. Jesus did not expect that everyone would be saved, but He did expect the gospel to be preached convincingly to every creature. The only way the Great Commission can be fulfilled is for every believer to reproduce himself.

The importance of follow-up ministry cannot be overstressed. Whatever your strategy, your schedule and methods must be flexible. Living people cannot be confined to static molds.

God desires to express creatively through you and your personality a method designed for you and your community. Methods must never become your master; they must always be your servants.

The Biblical principle of follow-up is imperative. The Holy Spirit longs to be creative through His church, in the words of Colossians 1:28, "present[ing] every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

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