

Onwards and Upwards

Discipleship is by no means restricted only to the teaching of a new believer. However, for the purposes of this article, I will focus my thoughts to discipleship of new Christians.

The task of the evangelist is important but once saved the new believer is like a baby. The new Christian needs to be incorporated and nurtured, not ignored, interrogated, deflated or isolated. A baby needs to be looked after and cared for so it may grow up strong, healthy and mature. So a new Christian needs good follow up and discipling.

Discipleship and evangelism are linked. They are intertwined and depend on each other. Once someone has realised their need for Christ and has surrendered to Jesus; then a life long process of learning and developing their faith begins. There is an obligation for Christians to pull along side and share their insights, experience and learning to those wanting to develop their faith and gifting (see 1 Thes 5:14). A "weaker" or younger Christian can learn much from a "stronger" or more mature Christian and become stronger themselves. Christ after he chose his disciples trained, equipped and taught become them, as recorded in the gospels, for about three years. The apostle Paul (recorded in Acts) took Timothy, Silas and others under his wing. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul helped to develop these men so they were better equipped as Christians, and better able to function in the tasks that were set before them.

Discipleship does not end with a little bit of study with someone after he or she becomes a Christian, but is a life long process. Once a person is saved, they need to be nurtured, taught, shown friendship, guidance and helped as much as possible to mature in Christ, as a baby needs to grow into a child, teenager then adult.

The relationship between a parent and their child changes and develops as the child matures. That relationship remains precious even after the son or daughter has become an independent adult. It is also a reciprocal relationship where the parent influences their child but the child also influences the parent, and this increases as the child develops. This analogy is apt for a person discipling a new Christian. The relationship between the two is dynamic and changes as the level of maturity and understanding increases. It is a journey of discovery and growth for both people.

A discipler should be an example of how a Christian ought to be but not to take the place of Christ. I realise Christians are not perfect, but people do watch us, especially new Christians. With this in mind disciplers should pay attention to their own relationship with Christ and what is happening in relation to God in their lives. A person living and walking close to God has greater beneficial influence than a person that is not strong in Christ. No amount of words or study can affect someone as profoundly as allowing them to see the living Christ through actions, deeds and the example of their life.

Different people need to be nurtured in different ways, so pray about how to help a person. I have found that sometimes the person to be disciplined may require a one on one study due to personal make up and circumstances. Others are happy to be a part of a new believers' group while others may not be ready to do any formal teaching initially. If unsure about where to begin, have a chat to your pastor or to a mature Christian experienced in discipleship.

Discipling a new Christian includes getting along side, teaching and pointing the disciple to the example of Christ and to His instruction book The Bible. The goal is to see that person grow and develop as a Christian, and to become a functioning member of the Church. If

the person has been a Christian for a while; then the goal may be to assist them to further develop in whatever areas they wish, such as particular spiritual gifts.

Of much importance is the question, "Does the new Christian own a Bible?" If not, help them choose one or give them one as a gift. I feel the possession of a Bible is important for a new Christian. The Bible is a part of the needed food for the new believer (and indeed for all Christians). Without it the new believer can wither and die due to lack of proper nutrition.

To help disciple a new Christian there are generally resources available at many churches, mission groups, Christian organisations, and Christian bookshops. Resources can take the form of different books, tapes, and videos. Studies on various books, themes or topics in the Bible, or foundational studies such as Alpha and Christianity Explained, may be helpful.

In closing, I would like to mention that discipleship at whatever level, especially for a new Christian, is a matter of considerable responsibility. There is a great need to depend on the power of prayer and God's Holy Spirit before, during and after undertaking any form of discipleship.