

# Pre-Discipleship: The Forgotten Element in Evangelism

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Over the years, through preaching, teaching, and personal work, I have personally seen hundreds come to Christ. But I am ashamed to tell you that out of the many who supposed to have come to Christ, only a few I know are continuing with Christ. Jesus commanded us, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations?" (Matthew 28:19-20) Are we truly reproducing disciples for Jesus Christ?

## The Problems in Evangelism

I struggle with some of the problems we face in evangelism. First, there is a segment of our church community who are saturated with misplaced values giving little priority to reaching the lost. Second, evangelism in some parts of the world has such a negative image that some Christians are apologetic in being involved in it. Third, syncretism in our world has clouded our way in producing pure faith. Fourth, our rapid transitioning world has left many of our methodologies in evangelism ineffective or irrelevant. Fifth, we are not producing disciples. The bottom line is that many of our converts to Christianity have made decisions for Christ, but are not followers of Jesus. We have made it easy for people to come to Jesus when in reality being a disciple is a difficult journey. Did not Jesus turn to the large crowds following him and told them, "any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple?" (Luke 14:33)

Our Christian outreach efforts have resulted in people making decisions for Christ but not commitments to Christ. Our evangelism produces one disciple out of every one thousand people with whom we share the gospel. For every 1,000 people who attended an evangelistic effort, there is about a 3% response by those who want to receive Christ (30 people). Only about 3% of the 30 continue on to join a church after a certain period of time. That means if one would consider church membership as equating to discipleship; then one disciple is produced out of 1,000. Studies have shown from a very successful 1976 Billy Graham Crusade in Seattle that three disciples were produced out of every 1,000 who heard the gospel.(1) That same year statistics for a Campus Crusade For Christ campaign in six North American cities revealed that five disciples were produced for every thousand gospel presentations.(2) The "not so successful" evangelistic efforts would show that there are even less than one disciple being produced for every thousand who are exposed to the gospel. The bottom line is that we are not producing disciples. We, the church, have spent millions of dollars, with much energy, manpower, resources over the years in reaching out, but resulting in very few disciples.

## A Renewed Understanding of Evangelism, Conversion, and Discipleship

The root of the problem of the fruit of very few disciples may be from our understanding of evangelism, conversion, and discipleship. We must re-examine our understanding on evangelism, conversion, and discipleship to see whether we have strayed from the biblical truth and practice. First of all, we need to re-examine our understanding of the biblical role of the evangelist. The word evangelist, from where we get the word evangelist is found only three times in the New Testament. Acts 21:8 described Philip as an evangelist. The Apostle Paul challenged Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" in 2 Timothy 4:5. This challenge was written in the context of discipleship. Paul was not only encouraging Timothy to bring the faithful to maturity in Christ, but challenge Timothy to do the work of the evangelist and bring the unbelieving towards maturity in Christ. The third passage in Ephesians 4:11-13 describes the evangelist as having a part to bringing believers towards maturity in Christ. Both evangelists and pastors have the same responsibility in bringing the body towards maturity in Christ. The difference is their starting point. We must again see the role of the evangelist as one who brings a seeker of God to maturity in Christ. This was more a norm in the New Testament than in our present day outreach.

Secondly, many Christians understand conversion through only one conversion model. Their example of the dramatic conversion model is the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Raymond Paloutzian, in his book *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*,<sup>(3)</sup> identified two other models of conversion. A second model of conversion is the unconscious model where a person grew up in a Christian home and began to follow the Lord. Timothy was an example of this model. A third model of conversion in the Bible was the gradual model. The Bereans exemplified this model by examining the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. Many people go through a period of seeking before they find Jesus. These models of conversion help us understand that conversion for some is crossing a line in their journey, but for others it is a process that may take time and diligence.

Thirdly, we need to re-examine our understanding of discipleship. *Mathetes* means learner, pupil, or follower. A disciple is a follower of Jesus. However, what does discipleship look like in the context of our church? I have had many discussions about this with a number of pastors and Christian leaders. Some understand discipleship as a program in their church. Others see it as a structure in people development. The problem of reducing discipleship into a program or system is that theoretically a young man can complete a program going through the system at 19 years of age. Do we then call him a ?mature? disciple of Christ? This is not to say that a teen cannot be a mature disciple of Christ, but that biblical discipleship must be more than completing a program.

We must begin to understand that biblical discipleship is not just one thing, but many things. There is an aspect of teaching and learning in biblical discipleship. There is also an aspect of a mentoring relationship. Biblical discipleship often takes place in the context of ministry involving much prayer and resulting in transformation. Disciples mature through a variety of factors in the church. Sometimes it?s the church body that helps a believer to grow. Other times individual brothers or sisters in Christ contribute to that growth. Other factors of growth may involve small groups, special training, mentors, personal studies, and even Bible school. Biblical discipleship need not to be limited to one single entity but be seen through a discipleship matrix towards spiritual growth.

## Rethinking Our Strategy

In Jesus? day, young boys and girls would study the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) beginning at the age of 5. This was part of their educational system called *Bet Sefer*.<sup>(4)</sup> It would not be surprising to find a 10 year old child to have memorized the law in the first century. The next level of education was *Bet Talmud* where a child would study the Jewish Bible (Old Testament). It would not be surprising to find a young man at the age of 14 to have memorized the Old Testament in Jesus? day. The keenest of the students would then seek to study under a rabbi for the dream ambition of many was to become a rabbi. When Jesus asked the fishermen to follow him, they thought that he was a rabbi. All of them had at least *Bet Sefer* and some even studied through *Bet Talmud*. One could make a case that every Jewish believer in the New Testament went through this pre-discipleship process of *Bet Sefer*, *Bet Talmud*, and even studied under a rabbi before becoming a Christian. Such was the case of the Apostle Paul who studied under Gamaliel before he met with Jesus. Every Jewish Christian had a solid foundation in the Scriptures through a pre-discipleship process before they made any kind of commitment to Christ.

What about the Gentiles in the New Testament? Many of the Gentile Christians were first described as God-fearers in the book of Acts. God-fearers were Gentiles who were drawn to the Jewish religion and kept all the observances of Judaism except circumcision. Such was the case of Cornelius and many God-fearing Greeks in Thessalonica and in Athens. God-fearers would have studied the Word of God and went through a pre-discipleship process.

Pre-discipleship is a process of evangelism that engages a seeker for Christ in a study in the Word of God to the point where a seeker fully understands the meaning of being a disciple of Jesus. Nearly every Christian believer in the New Testament went through a pre-discipleship process. In other words, New Testament Christians studied the Word of God before they became children of God.

Every Jew and every God-fearer had this foundation before they came to Christ.

There were also others who became Christians who were not Jews nor were referred to as God-fearers in the New Testament. We do not know whether the Ethiopian Eunuch was a proselyte to Judaism or a God-fearer, but we do know that he was reading Isaiah before his conversion. Sergius Paulus was the Roman governor of Cyprus and was described as "a man of intelligence" who wanted to hear the Word of God. Lydia was described as a "worshipper of God" before she found Jesus. The only person that we are uncertain of his pre-disciple status was the Philippian jailer who had enough knowledge to ask about salvation. It was common in the New Testament days for people to examine the Scriptures before making any kind of commitment to Jesus. The Bereans studied the Scriptures before they became Christians. The pre-discipleship process was the natural practice of the New Testament era.

If pre-discipleship was part of the New Testament process in evangelism, where is that process in our evangelism today? Our evangelism must allow for a majority of those who come to Christ to undergo a process of pre-discipleship before making any kind of commitment to Jesus. This pre-discipleship process is a natural development in the practice of evangelism.

The first detailed record of the gospel being shared with a total pagan culture was Athens. The response to the gospel in Acts 17 was threefold, rejection (some sneered), reservation (we want to hear you again on this subject), and reception (a few believed). People who hear the gospel for the first time have similar responses. We know that from the evangelistic campaigns in the past that there are no more than 5% of the people who will respond to the gospel when they first hear it. The Lord has prepared the hearts of this special group to respond to the gospel when they first hear it. I suspect that there are less than 5% of people who reject the gospel when they first hear of it. Many reject the inconvenience or the way the gospel was presented to them. Most do not have enough information to outright reject Jesus when they first hear about Jesus. The majority of people, I suspect more than 90% want to hear more before making any kind of commitment to Christ. This is a natural response to the gospel, yet very few of our evangelistic strategies target the 90% of seekers who want to hear more.

There are many biblical images that support the pre-discipleship process. Physical birth occurs 9 months after conception, yet some Christians expect spiritual birth immediately after spiritual conception. Jesus talked about the sowing of seeds and how they may fall on sometimes on hard, stony, or thorny soil. Farmers or gardeners are not discouraged by the type of soil, but they would remove the rocks and the weeds and prepare the soil so that the seed can take root in the ground. Pre-discipleship is preparing the soil. Jesus wants his followers to consider the costs before they build. He wants us to be like a king who evaluates his situation before heading into battle. The Bible tells us: "It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later consider his vows." (Proverbs 20:25) We must avoid getting people to pray to Jesus without the understanding that the one they pray to is Lord.

Pre-discipleship was a practice in the early church. The catechumenate was the model of learning in the early church with the purpose of systematically instructing adults on biblical, theological, and doctrinal aspects of faith.(5) It was a means of integrating converts into the church. This was practised during the early church history that produced leaders such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, and Augustine. After the early church, the catechumenate was lost in the church practice and Christian education was no longer for converts or for those who wanted to know more about Christianity. It was not until the early 18th century, when Ludwig Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravians, revitalized catechetical instruction.(6) The Moravians had great influence on John Wesley who established a Sunday school in his ministry for he saw that education as part of the evangelism process.(7)

## The Challenge Ahead

Pre-disciple was a key element in the process of evangelism biblically and historically. It is a process that allows seekers to move from pre-discipleship into discipleship. There is a need to put the new wine in new wineskins; but in the end it is still wine in the wineskins. Our expressions of the gospel must be creative and relevant, but it still needs to be the gospel in an effective structure. There are many examples of practices of pre-discipleship today in evangelism. The Alpha Course is a prime example of pre-discipleship. Strangers On the Road to Emmaus is another expression of pre-discipleship. New Tribe's Firm Foundations is another classic form of pre-discipleship. I have even developed a pre-discipleship tool called Seven Discoveries that has brought many to Jesus.

We must consider pre-discipleship as a means of significantly reducing the odds of the 1,000 to 1 in discipleship making. A seeker who discovers Christ through the pre-discipleship process naturally grows into discipleship. My research, experience, and observation tells me that pre-discipleship must again be a significant practice of evangelism. It is only then, can we begin to make disciples!

1 Win Arn, "Mass Evangelism: The Bottom Line," Church Growth: America 4, no. 1 (1978), 7.

2 Peter Wagner, "Who Found It?" Eternity Magazine (September 1977), 16.

3 Raymond F. Paloutzian, Invitation to the Psychology of Religion (Glendale, IL.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1983), 110-112.

4 Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1st printing, s.v. "education." In the Talmud, by Yehuda Moriel (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1971), 400ff.

5 Leon McKenzie and R. Michael Harton, The Religious Education of Adults (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2002), 32-33.

6 Michael J. Anthony ed., Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-first Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 20.

7 Harold W. Burgess, Models of Religious Education (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2001), 61-62.