

Need to Belong, Before They Join

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Since its founding, the church has accepted people into its midst in various ways. Obviously, in the book of Acts, we see the early church working through that process as new believers are brought into the fellowship. We see at least three elements. First, those that had been followers of Christ continued to meet, even after Christ ascended, and coalesced into congregations that met in homes. Second, those who heard the message from these initial disciples joined them in their home meetings. This group seemed to mostly come out of Jewish heritage. As they left Jerusalem, the believers created new home groups wherever they went. “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4 KJV). Eventually, they began to be open to those not of Jewish descent. “And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 10:45 KJV). Finally, it would seem whole households came as a unit. “And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house” (Acts 16:32 KJV).

This pattern of group conversion continued for centuries. In 313 Constantine and Licinius announced “that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared

best.”¹ On February 27, 380, Theodosius I in the Edict of Thessalonica declared the Catholicism of Nicene Christians the state church of the Roman Empire. The consequence of this edict was strict enforcement of Christianity by elements of the state. Being a Christian was equated with being part of the Empire and other groups including other Christian groups not aligned with the Nicene view were persecuted.²

The practice of converting kings who in turn would bring those in their kingdom to Christianity continued for several more centuries. An example is Clovis I, who had married a Burgundian Catholic named Clotilda in 493, and was baptized in 496 by Saint Remi after a decisive victory over the Alemanni at the Battle of Tolbiac. According to Gregory of Tours, over three thousand of his soldiers were baptized with him.³ Even today, it is far easier in Islamic countries if the whole family or community will make a joint conversion than if one person singles himself out.⁴

There seem to be two factors that moved the Western church toward its current pattern, which places all its emphasis on individual conversions. At least, as it has been regaled in our historical literature, one was the stance of individuals who stood up to the Roman Catholic Church and the groupthink accompanying the time leading up to the Reformation. What we think we know of this era may not be a reality, but the reality created by our North American bias toward individualism. The period's literature is full of community conversions, although the only ones we, from the Protestant tradition, relate to as truth are about people leaving the Roman Church.

This period also is chock-full of

¹ Lactantius, “Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died,” New Advent, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0705.htm>.

² “Imperial Edict Decrees Catholic Christianity – 380,” Christian History Institute, 2022, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/dailyquote/2/27#comment-5892004893>.

³ Melissa Snell, “Biography of Clovis, Founder of the Merovingian Dynasty,” ThoughtCo., May 24, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/profile-of-clovis-1788678>.

⁴ Thomas Law, “Book Summary: Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus,” TomLaw.org. October 13, 2014, <http://tomlaw.org/booksummaries/miraculous-movements-how-hundreds-of-thousands-of-muslims-are-falling-in-love-with-jesus>.

opportunities lost as whole empires would have turned to Christianity if we had only been bolder in our witness. The history of the gospel in China is an example. “In the 13th century, Venetian traders, Niccolo and Matteo Polo arrived in China and met Kublai, the Great Khan and Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty. In this little-known encounter, Kublai asked the Polo brothers to inquire of the Pope at Rome to send 100 teaching monks (missionary theologians) to enlighten him about the Man on the Cross.”⁵ Unfortunately, the response was minimal. “Italian Franciscan Father John of Montecorvino became the first Catholic missionary to China, and the period that followed became known as the second evangelization. In 1307, Pope Clement V made Father John an archbishop for his success at converting some high-level Chinese officials, baptizing about 6,000 people, and erecting churches.”⁶ It begs the question of what would have happened if 100 missionaries had gone instead of just one.

The other factor mentioned above, the North American bias toward individualism, has colored our understanding of what a conversion looks like. Because of our heritage of the individual making his way across the continent to forge new paths and establish new towns, we have focused all our energies and perspective on the individual. When we think of mass conversions, our minds immediately go to the individuals involved without giving much, if any, consideration to the psychology of the group.

In fact, when people come as a group, we suspect that they, in reality, are not making a true confession. The only true conversion is made by an individual without reference to the community or family. Our rugged individualism of the pioneer days and the mystique surrounding this nostalgia causes us to be blind to how God

sometimes works. Many of us are praying for a “great awakening” to overwhelm North America, but that may not be possible because of our limiting beliefs.

Paradigm Shift

We are in the midst of a massive paradigm shift. During, at least the last century, the church developed a progression from “lost to redeemed” that it thought was sacrosanct. It was understood that a “lost” person would be “saved” by understanding the depth of their “lostness.” Once they reflected on that lostness and understood how Christ had died for them, then they would “accept Jesus as their Savior.” They would be saved from the horrible “world of sin.” At that point, they would confess Jesus before a church and would then be baptized. For many, the most critical part of the equation was baptism. This has become increasingly clear as baptisms have fallen off and the Southern Baptist denominational leadership wrings its collective hands. Once the person was baptized, everyone would breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Two somewhat conflicting trends have gained prominence in Baptist life over the last few years. One is the emphasis on baptism. Under the leadership of then-president Bobby Welch, the Southern Baptist Convention launched a campaign to have one million baptisms during an ecclesiastical year.⁷

The idea was to regain its historic

“Many of us are praying for a “great awakening” to overwhelm North America, but that may not be possible because of our limiting beliefs.”

⁵ Ron Choong, “Silk Road Christianity - Marco Polo, Kublai Khan & the Persian Church of Baghdad,” LinkedIn. November 21, 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/marco-polo-kublai-khan-christian-missions-china-ron-choong>.

⁶ Archdiocese of Baltimore, “Brief history of the Catholic Church in China,” Archdiocese of Baltimore, January

19, 2012, <https://www.archbalt.org/brief-history-of-the-catholic-church-in-china>.

⁷ Baptist Press, “Bobby Welch, if tapped by SBC, envisions 1 million baptisms,” Baptist Press, June 10, 2004, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/bobby-welch-if-tapped-by-sbc-envisions-1-million-baptisms/>.

leadership in church membership since, for most Baptist churches, baptism is how the “lost” are inducted into the church membership. The campaign never accomplished its intended goals, and the difference between the years leading up to the campaign and those that followed was insignificant.

The other trend is the emphasis on conversions seemingly at any cost. The classic imagery is the “revival” service during which the people who attended the meeting were enticed to make a “decision.” A professional clergy designated as “evangelist” grew to prominence. These evangelists would use any means possible to gather as many people as possible for their meetings (some would call them performances) and then often “guilt” those attending to coming forward even if they had previously confessed Jesus as Lord and been baptized. Placing money under chairs, having raffles for high-dollar items like cars, and riding bulls are just some of the gimmicks used which often have made their way into some megachurches.⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon said, “If you have to give a carnival to get people to come to church, then you will have to keep giving carnivals to keep them coming back.”

Although the most famous evangelist, Billy Graham, never used these gimmicks, even his organization would warn the organizers of the evangelistic campaigns that only a tenth of those who “came forward” would make it into a church, and only a tenth of those would actually be baptized. In other words, only one percent of those who attended the campaigns or crusades would actually make it onto the membership rolls of the churches. The Billy Graham organization informed the churches that participated that those who already had a relationship with a member of their congregation and came with that person to the meeting would most likely become a part of their congregation (Conversation between author

and the Billy Graham Crusade organizer of the Dallas/Fort Worth Crusade in 2002).

Some, including myself, have worried that what is really happening is those who go through this process of being “saved” are actually being inoculated and not really “saved.” They go through the motions and are convinced by those they are talking with that all they must do is say the “magic” words, and presto, they are saved. Many pastors even “guarantee” them their “salvation” if they repeat certain words or phrases regardless of their heart’s intent.

This has concerned some so much, there is an increasing emphasis on “getting the person lost” before being saved. That is, they need to understand what sin means, what they have done, and the consequences of those actions on their eternal destiny before they can understand what God has done for them.⁹

Traditional Pattern

Most churches in the “free” tradition follow this process: saved, baptized, become a member of the church, indoctrinated, and then put to work in the church. Once a person is “saved” and baptized in the “free” tradition, he becomes a church member. Then comes the process of indoctrination, often known as discipleship.

Unfortunately, most often, this process is intended to make the person conform to the norms and traditions of the congregation of which they are becoming a part. Its purpose is not to help them know how to be more like Christ but to help them understand the congregation’s expectations and conform to those expectations. The pattern book they study is other church members, not the Bible and the patterns taught by Christ. Outward appearance and conformity to generally accepted norms allow the person to become truly a part of the in-crowd and

⁸ Timothy George, “Gimmicks and God,” First Things, June 15, 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/06/gimmicks-and-god>.

⁹ Mike Jeshurun, “A Man Must Be Lost Before He Can Be Saved,” Sovereign Grace, June 8, 2015, <https://michaeljeshurun.wordpress.com/2015/06/08/a-man-must-be-lost-before-he-can-be-saved/>.

eventually one of the decision-makers.

They are put to work once they have proven their loyalty to the congregation by their dress, actions, attendance, etc. Only after the person has relinquished all the attributes the group understands are antithetical to being a “good” Christian are they given any responsibilities, even the most menial jobs, such as, cleaning up after the fellowship meals or mowing the church’s lawn. Only after they “fit in” are they really allowed to join.

There seems to be a growing pattern that would indicate people today want to know they belong before they sign on the dotted line and join the church. What I will say next will create a massive problem for most of our churches. It is even going to fly in the face of the most recent moves on the part of evangelical leadership. The old patterns will not work in the world in which we live. They have run their cycle. If churches continue to do them, they will fall prey to the definition of insanity misattributed to Albert Einstein: “Continuing to do the same thing, expecting a different result.” (The quote actually comes from Rita Mae Brown, the mystery novelist, in her 1983 book *Sudden Death*.)¹⁰

New Pattern

The emerging pattern goes something like this: work in the church, a mission, or ministry project; learn what it means to be a Christian (be discipled); grow in your understanding of Christ’s role in your life; make a commitment to be a follower of Christ; then join the church. Often, the person is so involved in the regular life of the church, those around them think they are already members of the congregation. In fact, many times, they are unsure if they have already crossed the divide from non-member to member and will ask, innocently enough, “Am I a member

of the church?” That is when the congregation’s leadership is clued to the fact that the person feels comfortable enough to move to the next level in their relationship with the church and more importantly with Christ. Now those in the church have an opportunity to help them understand what it means to be a follower of Christ and not just a person who puts on the trappings of Christianity.

Discipleship Transformed

As we think critically about disciples, we need to consider at least three things. One, we need to move from formal to informal. Two, we need to move from linear to non-linear. And three, we need to move to understand that discipleship begins before the person is saved.

All too often, we think that we must get people saved before we can begin discipling

them. I am finding that discipleship is a process that starts before a person makes a profession of faith.

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Using the three definitions of the Biblical word “saved,” the point in time when I was saved (justification) is on the continuum of being saved (sanctification), which will lead to my being saved when I die (glorification). In other words, the “unsaved” around us are being discipled by us whether we are conscious of it or not. That discipleship process can lead them to find Jesus and begin the process of growing in Him, or what we might call a formal discipleship process. It often does not lead them to Jesus since they are not convinced those who claim to be Christians are different from those not claiming that title.

¹⁰ Christina Sterbenz, “12 Famous Quotes That Always Get Misattributed,” Business Insider, October 7, 2013,

<https://www.businessinsider.com/misattributed-quotes-2013-10>.

Discipleship Proposal

Traditionally (at least for the last fifty, maybe one hundred years), we have thought of discipleship as something that starts at the moment of conversion and moves forward. But is this true? I would suggest a broader and more helpful way to think about this topic.

I think discipleship begins at the point when two people meet—at hello. A discipleship construct is being negotiated at that instant. Each person decides whether they will be a disciple (follower) of the other. This social construct is part of all of life's relationships and one, unfortunately, which we have not recognized as part of the discipleship process.

Discipleship is not strictly a Christian construct. Every day we meet new people, and we make a decision as to whether to continue the relationship. Discipleship routinely takes place in all aspects of life, most of the time without conscious thought. Social media has some great examples of this concept. Every time you send a "Friend Request" on Facebook, you ask someone to follow you—i.e., become your disciple. Twitter and Pinterest might be the most blatant illustration of this idea. When surfing the website, a user may sign up to "Follow" another person who shares similar tastes or has interesting ideas. In other words, they chose to become a disciple. In all instances, as people follow others, they are being discipled into whatever is vital to the relationship. This may be related to sports, skill development, recreational activities, or other aspects of life.

When we meet someone, the decision about becoming a follower is discussed (probably non-verbally and possibly unconsciously). Some of the questions being considered are: (1) Is the relationship going to continue? (2) Toward what end is the discipleship going? And (3) How long will it continue? When we meet someone and go through this process, we need to think through one more question—(4) Am I taking them to Jesus?

As Christians, we should seek ways to disciple people we meet toward salvation and on into eternity. Every encounter is a discipleship opportunity. People are looking for answers, and we have them.

You may think this has an "old-time evangelism" feel. While I agree that it is evangelism (i.e., introducing people to Jesus), it is not the "traditional evangelism" practiced during the last fifty-plus years (i.e., confrontational evangelism). At the same time, it is not what has traditionally been called relational evangelism (i.e., developing relationships to evangelize). It is living life and investing in others as they invest in you.

Discipling Others

Discipleship is not a class we attend or a course of knowledge we acquire. We might go to a class to understand, but that is not discipleship. It is not memorizing a set of facts and a method of delivering information. It is not even memorizing a set of Scripture verses, although memorizing Scripture is always good.

These are what they are, gaining knowledge and memorizing information. They do not necessarily represent any form of transformation. Discipleship comes in the form of obedience and application. The Bible tells us that Satan knows a lot about God and is not a follower. Judas Iscariot followed Jesus for three years and yet never became a disciple. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (NASB1995). So, the question is not, what are you learning, but what are you doing with what you have learned?

Previously I mentioned that discipleship is living life together. I went on to say that we are all disciples and have disciples. The question we need to ask ourselves is toward what and whom are we leading our disciples. Although we might use a "discipleship class" as a tool to share information and knowledge, this is not our

primary means of discipleship. If those with whom we share life (at work, on the ball field, in class, at the grocery store, etc.) don't see Jesus in our lives, there will be a total disconnect between what we say and what we do. They may be saying that what we are doing is "shouting so loudly," that they can't hear what we say.

You might be throwing up your hands by now and saying there is no hope. In fact, many may be going to the default of turning discipleship over to the pastor. After all, he is a professional, and he knows how to do this. Well, that very well may be the problem. First, the pastor does not know your friends. Second, your friends will discount what the pastor says because, in their minds, "he is paid" to play this role.

It is up to you. As you walk through life, people whom you meet are evaluating whether you are "real." They want to know what you say you believe has really made a difference in your life. They want to know if this happens only on Sunday for an hour or if it also affects how you deal with people Monday through Saturday. They want to know Jesus has made a difference in your life because they need that in their life and are hoping that He can make a difference in their life as well.

Mahatma Gandhi is considered the father of modern India.

When the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ."

"If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian

today," he added.

Gandhi's closeness with Christianity began when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. Apart from being attracted by the Christian faith, he intently studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was also seriously exploring becoming a Christian, which led him to his discovery of a small church gathering in his locality.

These strongly entrenched Biblical teachings have always acted as a panacea to many of India's problems during its freedom struggle.

After deciding to attend the church service in South Africa, he came across a racial barrier, the church barred his way at the door. "Where do you think you're going, kaffir?" an English man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone.

Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here."

The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps."

This infamous incident forced Gandhi to never again consider being a Christian, but rather adopt what he found in Christianity and its founder Jesus Christ.¹¹

How about us?

Make Disciples, Teaching Them to Obey

As mentioned, discipleship is more than sharing cognitive learning. It also is more than "relational evangelism," which relates to them until they are "saved." It is building a relationship, starting where the person is, then helping that person (even while they are in the process) share what they are learning with those around them. This is done to reinforce what they are learning and build a community that will be supportive going forward. (Yes, I am suggesting

¹¹ Dibin Samuel, "Which Christ Do You Follow?," *Companions of Jesus*, 2020, <https://www.cjesus.net/post/which-christ-do-you-follow>.

that even those who have not confessed Jesus as Lord can disciple others into faith with Jesus as they too are being discipled.) Discipleship begins at “hello” and continues for a lifetime. It is life-on-life, growing in Christ.

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus tells us that as we go through life, make disciples who obey what He has commanded. In fact, I believe every Christian’s purpose or mission statement should be something like this: I am a follower of Jesus who uses the rhythms of life to share Him with others, thereby modeling what they should do as they follow Jesus.

The standard definition of a disciple is “one who follows.” As mentioned previously, I find it fascinating that this is the term Twitter and Pinterest use to identify those who receive your comments. We talk about “following” someone on Facebook. Since discipleship means following, these people are our disciples.

As you can see, discipleship is not a Christian construct. It was not in the first century, and it is not in the 21st century. In fact, I believe all relationships are discipleship opportunities. Therefore, as mentioned, discipleship begins at “hello” as we each are sizing up the other, trying to determine if this is someone whom we would like to “follow.”

We do this all of the time in life as we follow people to learn from them. We call this being an “apprentice,” a “trainee,” an “intern,” etc. All of us have disciples. The question is not, will we develop disciples, but what kind of disciples will we grow? Will they follow us as we follow Jesus, or will they go down some other path because they understand that that is the focus of our lives?

As each of us looks back to our own discipleship journey, most of us would have to admit we began learning about Jesus and His claims on our life long before we asked Him to be our Savior. Those of us fortunate enough to have grown up in a Christian home probably would indicate the process began when we were born.

But most everyone would recognize there is a process from hearing about Jesus to accepting Him through which all of us go. I would suggest this is part of the discipleship process. In other words, discipleship begins when we first hear, not when we decide. Salvation is on the discipleship continuum, not at its beginning.

For the last few decades, our standard has been to share Jesus. When the person makes a profession of faith, we invite them to join in a study we understand will help them “learn” about being a Christian. But discipleship is not a formal class that someone goes through, but a life that someone follows. It is more caught than taught. Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 11:1 those reading the letter to be his disciple like he is a disciple of Jesus. Paul establishes a pattern for us to follow. In other words, we should seek people to follow us as we follow Jesus, showing them Jesus in us.

“Discipleship begins when we first hear, not when we decide. Salvation is on the discipleship continuum, not at its beginning.”

The Discipleship Challenge

Foundational to all the church should be doing is discipleship. If we can get this one piece right, all the others will fall into place. We must have strong, healthy churches that are helping their congregants become strong, healthy disciples who make disciples who make disciples. The question is, how can pastors and churches accomplish this? Also, what do Judicatories need to do to help churches fulfill this role in the lives of their congregants?

Traditionally we have seen discipleship as something that starts when a person makes a profession of faith. Furthermore, we have seen this as something that takes place within the programs and structure of the church building. Unfortunately, this is a very limiting view.

Discipleship is a continuum from being lost to eternity. In other words, discipleship begins before a person is saved and continues throughout a person's life. Salvation takes place on this continuum, not at its beginning.

Sometimes, programs can help us develop this process, but when programs, buildings, and structures limit what people do, they stop being beneficial to the discipleship process. Discipleship is life on life, lived out as people invest in others and help them see what God is doing in their lives and how He wants to be transformational in disciples' lives.

We need to move from additional to intentional. I would suggest the following path. (1) Pray. Ask God to direct you to those He has prepared and ask Him to help you know/discern what to say and when. (2) Recognize that every relationship, formal or informal, is a discipleship

relationship, whether we realize it or not. (3) Become more intentional about the messages (verbal, written, body, etc.) we communicate with those around us. Use the natural rhythms of life—Listening—Celebrating—Eating—Recreating—as opportunities to build relationships. (4) Use those messages and relationships to draw people to Jesus. Showing them how Jesus is at work in our lives and how He wants to be with them. (5) Be ready to formalize the discipleship relationship as those with whom we are working respond to the claims of Christ in their lives. And (6) above all, be obedient to your Savior so others can follow that obedience in their own lives.

Remember, “people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care” (Theodore Roosevelt). “You can teach what you know, but you can only reproduce what you are” (T. D. Jakes). And finally, “a mind will reach a mind, but only a heart will reach a heart” (Wayne Cordeiro).

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